Black Mullah

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Village Life

Afghanistan, 1830

The village of Ghulamabad lay in a hollow between sunburnt hills, where dust clung to the wind and the soil remembered every drought. Houses were built from mud and dung, with roofs of woven cane that sagged under their own weight, and the lanes between them were so narrow that neighbours could quarrel without raising their voices. Here, in a house with walls the colour of ash, Ghilzai Pashtun Akbarkhan was born into a world of silence, wheat, and weary men. His father, Gulzar, worked the land with hands split open by the dry season, fingers swollen and cracked like roots that had forgotten water. The field he tended, no larger than a mule’s rest circle, bore wheat thin as bone, its heads reluctant to fill. Still, he rose before the first light, every morning wrapped in the same coat stitched by his dead wife’s hand, the threads loose and worn from a decade of soil and sweat.

Akbar was five when he first followed behind his father, dragging a hoe too large for his shoulders, eyes squinting against the rising dust. There was no instruction, only the expectation of movement. His small body grew into the rhythm of the field—the turn of the wrist, the squint toward cloudless sky, the way men pause before spitting when they think of hunger. In the evenings, he fed the goats: five wiry beasts with yellow eyes and crooked horns, kept more for milk and dung than meat. One of them, a she-goat with a torn ear, followed him like a curse, biting at his tunic when he turned his back. "That one’s got your mother’s soul," Gulzar once said, and laughed a little too long. His voice sounded like dry stones tumbling in a copper bowl. His laughter was rare.

Akbar's mother, Fariha, died when he was six. She coughed blood into the blanket one night, and by morning her body was cold, twisted away from the wall as if trying to flee the house. There was no doctor, only a neighbor woman who spat prayers and wept for too long. The grave was dug behind the house, under a fig tree that bore no fruit, and Akbar watched as they wrapped her in cloth and folded her into the earth. His sister, Anara, two years older, gripped his hand so hard her nails drew blood, but neither of them cried. There was no room for crying with a field waiting.

The years blurred with sameness. Wheat in spring. Goats bleating. Dust. Sometimes windstorms came from the west and scraped the sky clean. Sometimes a neighbour’s child died. Sometimes the men gathered in the village square to curse the tax collector. But mostly there was silence and stone. Akbar grew tall and lean, with forearms like braided rope and eyes that carried no expectation of comfort. By the time he was fifteen, he could lift a full water barrel onto his back and carry it up the slope to the house without pausing. He did it without being told.

At seventeen, Gulzar collapsed while digging a dry furrow, his hands clawing the earth as if trying to bury himself. The other men brought him back on a wooden door turned into a stretcher, his lips blue, dust caught in his beard. He lasted three more days, staring at the roof, speaking only once when he mistook Akbar for someone else. When the old man stopped breathing, no one in the village was surprised. “That field’s been killing him for years,” said an elder. “It just finished the work now.”

The goats remained. Anara spun wool, then cloth, then dreams that faded with every year. She did not marry. Suitors came, drank tea, left. Her face hardened. Akbar worked. The field was his now, along with the cracked hoe and the soil that swallowed sweat without mercy. The silence in the house deepened. At night, he sat outside on the stone bench, watching the stars flicker behind the clouds. The wheat grew no thicker. The goats grew older. The winter came early that year. So did the hunger.

By the time Akbarkhan turned twenty-six, the field had turned against him. The soil, long overworked, yielded wheat so thin it seemed ashamed to rise. The rains had become less generous each passing year, and the frost came earlier, biting the shoots before they could promise grain. He no longer bothered to measure the harvest in sacks. He measured it by hunger. Each season's yield meant only how long before his sister's cough returned, before his fingers grew too weak to break frozen bread, before the goats bled thin milk and began eating mud out of thirst.

The village had changed little. The same old men gathered under the cracked dome of the mosque, their beards longer, their judgments heavier. The same whispers passed between neighbors—who had stolen wood, who had sold a daughter, who was caught weeping behind the stable. Time did not move here; it weathered. And yet something had shifted in Akbar. Not in his words—he spoke rarely—but in the way his eyes lingered on things they had once passed over: the green flush in the ravine after spring, the route the traders took on their way north with crates too tightly shut, the words spoken in code by men leaning too close together in the shadow of the grain store.

It was during one such spring, when his own crop had failed to germinate, that he climbed the far ridge alone. Below him, on a slope sheltered from the wind, he saw rows of plants that were not wheat. He recognized them only from stories: the flowering head swollen and scarred, petals gone, stalks thick as a child’s wrist. A poppy field. Hidden from the village, fed by a private spring. Someone had turned the mountain into a secret. And it was growing fat.

He said nothing to Anara. She still boiled wheat husks into broth and pretended to believe it was enough. Her face had grown thin, her shoulders always wrapped in a shawl no matter the season. When he returned that night, she was darning a shirt by lamplight. He watched her needle rise and fall without saying a word. Her breath made a faint whistle through her nose, and he realized it was the only sound in the house.

That week, he began clearing the upper field. The slope behind the goat pen had never been used—too steep for wheat, too stony for grazing. But it was hidden. He worked quietly, turning the earth by moonlight, burning thornbrush in low, smokeless fires. He traded an old brass bowl for seeds with a trader passing through from Jalalabad. The man handed them over with a glance that lasted too long.

By early summer, the shoots had taken root. Nothing grew so fast, so straight. He watched them with a careful hunger, as if afraid they might vanish. The goats no longer interested him. The wheat field lay fallow. Anara asked questions, then stopped. He rose before first light, returned after nightfall, clothes stained with resin and earth. He began speaking less, not more.

Word did not spread quickly. No one climbed his slope. No one cared about failed wheat. But he felt something in the air shift when his neighbor, Rahimdad, began appearing more often at the edge of the property. He would greet Akbar too slowly, his hand always on the hilt of his blade, asking vague questions about the health of the goats, the strength of the rain, the trouble with thieves. Akbar nodded. Smiled once. Said nothing. He knew the questions were not about goats.

In the village, stories began to twist their way through tea-stained lips. One man whispered about a new trader paying in silver coin. Another said there were boots from the east crossing the hills, seeking something they wouldn't name. A child claimed he saw flowers on a hill that weren't supposed to grow there. And Rahimdad, once too poor to afford a second pair of shoes, now walked with gold thread in the hem of his robe.

It would not be long before someone came looking with real questions. The land was not quiet. Nor were the men. Nor were their knives.

Three nights after the first whispers stirred, Akbarkhan found the goat pen open. The gate hung loose, one of its ropes cut clean through. A second rope had been chewed, but the bite marks were uneven—too sharp, too deliberate. Of the five goats, only three remained. One stood in the corner trembling, streaks of blood on its haunches. Another had kicked the feeding trough into splinters. The she-goat with the torn ear was gone.

He stood still in the dark, watching the shadows settle around the pen. His breath came slow. There were no tracks, not in the dry-packed earth, only the silence of something finished. A dog barked somewhere distant, across the hills. He stepped out, pulled the gate shut without tying it, and walked back to the house. The fire had gone out. Anara slept on a mat with her shawl drawn over her face. He sat in the corner and watched the embers like they might rearrange themselves into an answer.

In the morning he went to the mosque square where the elders sat. No one greeted him at first. The old men crouched low, their legs wrapped in wool, long beards moving in the wind. The mullah wiped dust from his lips and squinted up. "Your father's goats were better

watched," he said. No one laughed. Akbar said nothing. He squatted, his shadow long behind him, and waited until the mullah grew tired of staring.

He spoke when the silence thickened. "Gate was cut. Rope torn. Not by teeth." He let the words hang, their weight quiet and deliberate. "Three left. One bloodied. One gone."

"Wolves," said an elder with a hollowed face.

"No tracks."

"Thieves don't take goats. Too slow."

Akbar's mouth barely moved. "Not if it's a message."

That sentence changed the light. The men leaned back. One coughed. The mullah looked past him, toward the hills. "And what would be the message, Akbarkhan?"

But Akbar didn't answer. He stood, dusted his knees. His gaze flicked once toward the far slope, where the sun hit the edge of Rahimdad's orchard. The trees bent slightly in the wind, their shadows crawling like insects.

He spent that day at the field, not touching the poppy, only walking its border. He checked the irrigation channel, kicked the stone that blocked the water, watched it trickle down into the roots. His hands stayed on the hilt of his sickle, though there was no harvest yet. The air carried a scent of crushed resin, sharp and strange. He kept his back to the slope.

That evening, Rahimdad came.

He didn't knock, didn't call out. Just stepped into the yard like it was a place he'd known all his life. His robe was clean. His turban was tied too tight. His mouth twitched beneath his beard.

"Bad luck," he said, gesturing toward the pen. "Goats wander. Dogs chase."

Akbar nodded. "Happens."

"I heard it might have been worse. One of the village boys said your sister was out in the dark." His eyes gleamed. "Lucky she wasn't taken too."

Akbar stepped forward once. Close enough to see a tooth missing on the left side. "I'll find who did it."

Rahimdad shrugged. "Goats are cheap."

"Some aren't."

The older man shifted his weight. He looked toward the slope, then back. "You've been working late these days. New crop?"

“Still wheat.”

Rahimdad chuckled. “Wheat don’t shine in the dark.”

Akbar didn’t answer.

Rahimdad let the silence hold a moment, then turned. “Just make sure your field stays on your land. Boundaries matter. For the living. For the dead.” And then he walked away.

Akbar watched him until he disappeared behind the corner. He felt the wind shift—dry and bitter. The she-goat’s torn ear had bled easily, once, when he was a boy and tried to fix it with thread. Now she was likely skinned, hanging from some fig tree out of spite. He didn’t mourn her. But he would answer for her.

That night, he didn’t sleep. He sharpened the sickle. Then he sharpened the knife. Then he walked the edge of his land again, counting stones by the moonlight, whispering his father’s name.

The next morning broke without colour. A thin, grey veil covered the valley, blurring the hills into silhouettes. Smoke from cookfires hung low, clinging to the ground like a warning. Akbarkhan stood at the edge of the field, staring at the poppies. They moved gently in the breeze, their swollen heads drooping as if weary from holding too much. Dew glistened on the stalks, each drop catching the dim light like glass about to break. They were growing fast—too fast. He ran a hand along the nearest plant, fingers sticky with resin, then wiped it on his tunic and turned away.

He walked to the stream behind the rocks, where the irrigation channel split. Someone had tampered with the flow. A flat stone had been shoved deeper into the fork, cutting water from the lower beds. He knelt, removed it, and watched the trickle resume. His hands clenched in the cold water longer than needed. When he stood, he did not look back toward Rahimdad’s orchard. He didn’t need to.

By midday he had visited three men. Each one owed him small favours: one for goats Akbar had once helped deliver during a storm, another for carrying grain after a cousin’s wedding, the third for keeping quiet about a quarrel that nearly turned bloody years ago. None of them smiled when they saw him. They stood in doorways, eyes low, waiting for him to speak.

“I need two men tomorrow,” he said to each of them. “We walk to the elders. There’s a boundary stone moved.” He did not mention the goat. He did not mention the knife he had found driven into his door that morning, the hilt marked with two notches—an old clan sign, a silent dare. He didn’t need to. They understood the rhythm of signs.

That night, Anara sat by the fire cleaning lentils. Her shawl hung loose, hair fallen across her cheek. She hadn't spoken much in days, only watched. When Akbar entered, she didn't look up.

"You're going to the council."

He sat, took a piece of flatbread, broke it without appetite. "I am."

"They won't stop it. You know that."

"Then they'll hear it."

She turned to him, her face thin and older than her years. "He won't let it go. Even if the elders speak. Even if they side with you."

"I'm not asking him to let go."

Her eyes narrowed. "Then what are you asking for?"

He chewed slowly. Swallowed. "I want him to name what he's done. If he speaks it in front of the elders, I'll have the right."

"To what?"

He looked at her, his gaze flat. "To answer."

Anara went quiet. She gathered the lentils in a cloth, tied it closed, and stood. "You'll drag our name with you into the dust." Her voice wasn't angry. It was tired. "You think you're your father's son. But you're not. He buried his rage. You let it grow."

He didn't reply. She left the room.

Outside, the sky had turned darker than it should have by that hour. Thunder rolled somewhere behind the hills. Akbarkhan stepped out, let the door swing open behind him. He walked the path past the old fig tree, past the boundary stone now lying crooked in the grass. He righted it, placing both hands on its flaking surface, pressing until the soil held.

Then he drew a line in the dirt beside it, one that no one could miss. He stood for a long time under the thickening sky, watching the wind bend the tops of the poppies. Tomorrow would bring words. After that, there would be blood.

The next morning broke with the sound of coughing hooves and wet gravel. A drizzle had crept in before dawn, softening the ground, drawing smoke low into the chest. The mountains vanished into mist. Akbarkhan walked the path to the village square with two men behind him—old Mahmud with a crooked spine and Feroz, the butcher's son, who wore his turban too tight and his belt too loose. Neither asked questions. They came the way men come to burials: out of obligation, not hope.

The council sat beneath the awning beside the mosque, cloaks pulled close, heads wrapped in wool. A pot of tea steamed on the flat stone in the center, untouched. The mullah was there, and four elders—two from the northern end of the village, one from the orchard side, and the last, Usman, an old fighter from the eastern hills who spoke rarely but remembered every name carved into a grave.

Rahimdad arrived just after Akbar. Alone, but not empty-handed. He carried a bundle wrapped in cloth, and when he sat, he placed it in front of him without a word. It was the kind of gesture that said everything while claiming nothing. His eyes didn't look at Akbar. They looked past him.

The mullah cleared his throat, but Akbar didn't wait for an invitation. He stood, dirt on his hem, eyes dark from sleeplessness.

"The stone was moved," he said. "The boundary line is mine. It's been mine since my father. Since his father."

Usman nodded. "You claim the field?"

"I do."

"The goats?"

"Cut rope. Knife in the door. No wolf leaves signs like that."

Rahimdad snorted softly but did not speak.

"The irrigation stone?"

Akbar met Usman's gaze. "Shoved deep. No child would do it."

There was a pause. Rahimdad slowly unwrapped the bundle. Inside, folded with care, lay the skin of the missing she-goat. The torn ear was still visible, curled inward like a closing hand. The fur was stiff, blood matted along the edges. He placed it down like an offering.

"I found this near my orchard," Rahimdad said, voice smooth. "Someone must have dropped it running."

Akbar's breath did not change. "Running?"

"A thief, maybe. Maybe someone who didn't want their field seen."

Usman reached forward, touched the edge of the hide. He didn't speak. His fingers traced the line of dried blood, then pulled back.

"There is a claim of insult," the mullah said finally. "Of theft. Of sabotage."

Rahimdad smiled. “There is a field growing something not fit for bread. Something not spoken of in this square.”

A murmur passed between the elders.

Usman turned to Akbar. “Do you deny the growth?”

Akbar looked past them, to the edge of the square where the road bent out toward the fields, then back at the line of their faces.

“I deny no soil I turned with my own hands.”

Usman nodded once, slowly. “Then this is no longer about goats. It is about land. And men.”

Rahimdad leaned back, arms folded. “Then say it plainly. If he wants war, let him draw the first blood.”

“I want the stone restored,” Akbar said, voice low. “I want my water left clean. I want what was mine not touched.”

“And if it is?” Rahimdad said, almost gently.

Akbar looked at the goat skin. “Then the skin won’t be the only thing brought back.”

No one spoke. Rain tapped softly on the canvas above. Usman reached for the tea, poured two cups. One for Akbar. One for Rahimdad. Neither man drank.

The mullah rose. “The council will think. By tomorrow, the stone must remain untouched. If it moves again, the matter becomes flesh.”

No one needed that explained.

As the men dispersed, Akbar stepped into the road. Rahimdad passed close, close enough for breath to mix.

“You’re not your father,” Rahimdad said softly.

Akbar didn’t turn. “No. He died quiet.”

He walked home through the light rain, hands empty, the memory of the goat’s ear still raw in his mind. By nightfall, the line would be watched. And if it moved again, it would not be goats that vanished.

That night, the wind carried no scent. The rain had washed the earth clean, and the silence that followed felt like breath held in a tight chest. Akbarkhan sat on the flat stone near the fig tree, the sickle resting across his knees, still marked with the grey of rust and the black of resin. The field above him was quiet, the poppies asleep beneath their veil of mist. He

listened—not for sounds, but for absences. The world always made noise; when it didn't, something waited.

Inside, Anara stirred, her footsteps soft over the packed earth. She did not speak to him. The door remained open behind her, creaking once, then settling. He heard the scrape of a bowl, the crack of wood in the stove. She was cooking again. She always cooked when she was afraid.

The boundary stone stood straight now, planted deeper than before. Akbar had returned after sunset to pack its base with rocks, tamping them into place with the back of the sickle. A message. Not a gesture of defence, but of invitation. It said, clearly, to move this now is to sign your name in blood.

The night grew colder. When he finally stood, the moon had pulled itself clear of the cloud cover, pale and distant. He checked the pen—goats quiet, the door shut tight, the rope bound with a second knot. Then he climbed the slope.

No lantern, no torch. Just the sharp edge of starlight and the memory of every stone on the path. At the top, he crouched among the poppies, scanning the edges of the field. The plants whispered against each other in the breeze. Their heads were heavy now, ready to be scored again. He would need to cut them soon. Cure the sap, package it in leaves, find a man to take it over the pass. But not yet. First, the stone.

He lay down on the ridge, facing Rahimdad's side, eyes just above the grass line. Time passed like dripping water. A cricket chirped near his ankle. Somewhere in the valley, a donkey brayed, sudden and sharp. Then silence.

Footsteps.

Soft. Too slow for goats. Too cautious for children. Akbar's breath stilled. He rose to one knee, knife in hand. The steps drew closer, then paused. A figure took shape, a bent shadow, hunched and wrapped in a cloak. Not Rahimdad. Too small. The figure moved to the stone, crouched, placed a hand on it. It stayed there a moment.

Then the hand pushed.

Akbarkhan stood. "If you move it, you'll have to lie beside it."

The figure froze. Slowly turned. The moonlight struck a young face—barely more than a boy's. Zamin, Rahimdad's cousin's son. Not even twenty. He didn't speak. His hand still rested on the stone.

"I told the elders. They said no."

Zamin didn't move. "He said to shift it back. Said to mark you."

Akbar stepped forward once. “Did he say he’d come with you?”

“No.”

“Then he sent you to die.”

Zamin swallowed. His eyes darted to the slope, back to the stone.

“You move it, boy,” Akbar said quietly, “and you change your name. You change your house. You change your grave.”

“I just do what I’m told.”

“So do goats.”

The boy stepped back. Turned. Ran.

Akbar watched until he vanished down the slope, arms flailing, feet sliding in mud. Then he stepped to the stone and spat beside it. “Tell your uncle,” he whispered into the night. “If he wants it moved, he can come lift it himself.”

He returned to the house just before dawn. Anara was still awake, a candle flickering near the stove. She didn’t ask what happened. She looked at the mud on his hands, then turned back to the kettle.

“We have no salt,” she said.

“I’ll get some from Basheer’s wife.”

“And wood?”

“Enough for three days.”

She nodded. “If we don’t get rain in spring, the field below won’t grow again.”

He sat down. “Then we’ll plant higher.”

She poured tea, her fingers steady. “You’ve started something you can’t end.”

“No,” he said. “He did.”

“And you’ll finish it?”

He looked at her, eyes dark beneath his brow. “If I have to. With stone. Or blade. Or fire.”

Outside, the crows were waking. The light crept slow over the ridge. The stone still stood. But not for long. Not without blood to hold it.

Three days passed. No one came near the field. Not Rahimdad. Not Zamin. Not even the curious-eyed boys who sometimes wandered too far from the goat paths and pretended not

to look. The stone remained upright, undisturbed. But the quiet had thickened, not loosened. It clung to the village like smoke from a slow fire—one still waiting for wind. People greeted Akbarkhan less. Their eyes passed over him. Men who once nodded at the mosque now glanced aside, lips tight. The council's judgment had been heard, but not accepted.

On the fourth day, he went to the bazaar across the ridge in Farozai, a half-day's walk through shale and silence. The market was small—goat cheese, wool thread, some jars of pickled radish, cracked pottery, blackened pans. He came for salt, but lingered at the trader's cart where the poppy buyers passed word in coded greetings. The man from Khost, face lined like folded cloth, weighed Akbar with one glance and gestured toward a bundle wrapped in lambskin.

"You've begun," he said, quiet, not smiling.

"I have."

"How much?"

"Five bricks. Soon six."

The man nodded. "You'll need ash to pack it. Goat dung burns hot."

"I know."

He unwrapped a pouch of black salt, placed it on the scale. "Price has shifted. The British pay more now. They want it clean. Cut wrong, they return it in pieces."

"I cut clean."

"Others don't."

"I'm not others."

The man tilted his head. "You'll need escort. After harvest. Once it moves, it becomes worth killing for."

Akbar said nothing. He took the salt, paid in coin. As he turned to leave, the man spoke again.

"Don't let the flowers blind you. The first cut is sweet. The second is bitter. By the third, blood flows easier than sap."

Akbar walked home in silence, the pouch tied to his belt. The wind had picked up. Dust swirled across the road, curling around his boots. He passed no one. At the ridge, he paused, looked back. Farozai lay in a haze of smoke, the bazaar's tents already half-lowered for evening. The hills above it were jagged and black, like teeth behind a smile.

Back in Ghulamabad, Anara was boiling lentils. The smell filled the house, heavy, comforting. She glanced up as he entered, then back at the pot.

“I saw Rahimdad’s daughter at the well.”

He didn’t sit. “And?”

“She said nothing. But her eyes…”

“What?”

“She looked afraid.”

Akbar walked to the rear of the house, placed the salt beside the stove. “That’s how snakes look before they bite. Not during. Before.”

That night, the wind howled harder. The goats kicked in their pen. Around midnight, Akbar stepped outside, pulled his cloak close, and sat by the fig tree. Clouds moved across the moon, tearing at each other in silence. The cold felt like a warning.

Then came the sound—soft, careful, broken by pause. He rose, stepped toward the slope. A shadow moved among the poppies. Not crouching. Standing. Someone walking slowly, methodically, along the edge of the field. A long object in hand.

Akbar reached for his blade, slipped into the darkness.

The figure turned.

A glint of steel in the air.

A splash of liquid across the stalks.

The scent hit him—kerosene.

“Stop,” he said, voice low, teeth tight.

The figure froze.

Then, without a word, it flung the bottle.

Flames leapt to life. Orange tore across the green.

Akbar ran forward, tackled the man. They rolled into the dirt, fists swinging, boots kicking for purchase. The man was younger, but smaller. He clawed at Akbar’s face, then reached for something in his coat. Akbar’s blade found the man’s side first—deep, fast, twisted. A choked breath escaped.

The fire crackled behind them. Poppies lit like paper, black smoke rising in thick columns. Akbar stood, chest heaving, blood on his wrist. The man lay still. It was Zamin.

In the glow of the fire, his face looked older. The lines drawn not by age but by fear. His eyes open, glazed.

Akbar didn't speak.

He dragged the body into the rocks beyond the ridge, buried it with stones, fast and silent. By dawn, the fire had eaten half the field. The rest smoked quietly.

He stood among the ashes as the sky brightened, black streaks on his hands, the scent of burnt resin thick in his throat.

The stone still stood.

But now, a body beneath it. Unnamed. Unspoken.

And the feud was no longer a matter of land.

The smoke hung in the air long after the fire had died. It did not rise—it lingered, pressed low to the earth as if ashamed of what it had carried. The poppy field, once bright with swelling heads, lay ruined, its stalks curled into blackened husks, sap blistered into ash. Akbarkhan stood at the edge with bare feet in the soot. The fire had spared nothing. Even the rocks were scorched. A ring of glass shimmered faintly where the heat had seared a patch clean.

The morning passed without movement. No one came. No dogs barked. No boys played in the alleyways. But by midday, the silence cracked. First one, then two villagers walked past the house without looking toward it. One spat in the dirt. The other paused at the bend in the road and made the sign of the evil eye. Word had passed already—though no one had spoken it. Something had been seen. Or guessed. It didn't matter. Zamin was gone, and the field was burnt. In this village, consequences didn't wait for proof. They followed scent like dogs.

Anara said nothing. She cooked in silence, her sleeves tied back, hands steady. When she laid the bowl down beside him—lentils, flatbread, salt—she did not sit.

"They came to Rahimdad's house," she said. "Ten men. His brother. Two from Farozai."

Akbar dipped the bread in the bowl. "Did they carry shovels?"

"No."

"Then they don't believe he's dead."

She looked at him a long moment. "But they believe you killed him."

He ate slowly, chewing each mouthful down with water. When he finished, he pushed the bowl aside and stood.

“Where are you going?”

“Council square.”

She stepped in front of the door. “You don’t have to.”

He stared at her, eyes dull with smoke. “If I don’t, they’ll say I hide.”

“Let them.”

“If I hide now, I lose the next step. And I need to choose the next step.”

She stepped aside.

The square was nearly full by the time he arrived. Men lined the low wall, seated on stones, some standing in groups with arms folded. No one called to him. No one made space. He stood in the center and waited.

The mullah approached, robes damp with sweat despite the chill. His eyes were hard. “Zamin is missing.”

“I know.”

“His blood was found near the rocks.”

Akbar did not blink. “His hands lit the field.”

There were murmurs. A boy whispered. Someone cursed under his breath.

Usman, the oldest among them, stepped forward. “Do you claim the killing?”

Akbar looked past him, to the burnt ridge, now barely visible over the roofs. “He came with fire. I gave him the same.”

Usman nodded slowly. “The field?”

“Gone.”

“And Rahimdad?”

“Still breathing. For now.”

Another elder, one of Rahimdad’s cousins, spoke up. “You dig a hole deeper each day, boy. You think the ground beneath you will hold forever?”

Akbar’s mouth twitched. Not a smile. “If it doesn’t, I’ll drag him down with me.”

The square fell quiet.

Usman turned to the mullah. “The council must speak. Let no man act until then.”

But everyone knew that was air. In Ghulamabad, vengeance moved faster than words. The blood had already spoken.

That night, Akbar did not sleep. He sat outside with his knife across his lap and his father's old musket propped beside him. The lock barely worked. He had no powder, only shot. But it looked like a threat, and that might be enough.

Around midnight, the goats stirred. He heard a voice outside—low, urgent. Then a rock struck the wall.

He rose.

By the time he reached the door, they were gone. Only footprints in the dust, small and many. Boys, maybe. Or men who crouched like boys. On the wall near the pen, a message had been scratched with charcoal:

Your blood will finish what your fire began.

He stared at it a while. Then went back inside, wiped the blade with a rag, sat again in the doorway.

He whispered his sister's name once, not loud.

Then he waited.

He would not hide.

He would not run.

But the blood had begun to rise.

And the rain would not fall again.

By morning, the message was gone. The rain had returned in the last hours before dawn, soft and cold, washing the charcoal into streaks that bled down the wall like tears no one would admit to. Akbarkhan stood in the yard, soaked to the knees, watching the earth drink. Mud clung to his boots. The goats huddled under the overhang, silent. Smoke rose from only a few chimneys in the village, thin and uncertain.

Anara stood inside, her arms crossed, shawl damp from the night's chill. She had not spoken since the night before, and Akbar hadn't asked. There was no use for words now. The breath between them had narrowed to necessity: eat, carry, wait. Her silence was not fear. It was the kind of silence that came from years of watching men bury sons before brothers, fields before fathers. She boiled the tea. He packed the soil over what remained of the scorched field. They did not look at each other.

Later, he went to the edge of the orchard trail and sat behind the old water basin, knees pulled tight beneath his cloak. From here he could see Rahimdad's roof, the smoke curling from its chimney, the broken wheelbarrow leaning against the wall. No movement. No voices. Nothing but the hiss of wet leaves and the occasional call of a crow. He had waited in this same spot as a boy, once hiding from his father's anger after letting the goats loose into a neighbour's field. The hiding then had been shame. Now it was calculation.

By midday, the rain stopped. Footsteps approached. Akbar remained still.

It was Feroz, the butcher's son, same one who had stood with him at the council. He crouched without a word, wiping rain from his brow with the edge of his sleeve.

"They sent for help," he said.

Akbar's eyes did not leave the house below. "Who?"

"Rahimdad. His brother rode east yesterday. Said you're stirring something too large for this village."

"Where?"

"Khujan, maybe. Or even Wardak."

Akbar nodded. That meant weapons. Or men who carried them for silver. Not for honour. Not for land. Men who shot into the dark and rode on before the crows came down.

"How long?" he asked.

"Four days. Maybe less. Depends on the river."

Akbar shifted. His shoulder ached from the cold. "You told me."

Feroz didn't move. "This isn't like before. You kill a man for your goats, for your land—people understand. But now it's weight. It's not just a fire. It's not just a boy. It's the name. They say you've stepped above the village. That you speak like your hands carry more than tools."

"They do."

Feroz looked at him, then away. "What are you going to do?"

Akbar's hand ran over the curved wood of the musket resting beside him. "If they bring war, I'll give it to them."

"And after?"

"There is no after."

Feroz didn’t reply. He stood, walked away without farewell, the kind of leaving men used when they were no longer sure whose side they were on.

That evening, Anara packed a bundle of clothes and left it near the door. She didn’t say what it was for, but he understood. He didn’t ask. She lit the lamp early, covered the windows with cloth, and boiled extra rice. When he sat to eat, she placed a second bowl beside him, not for herself. Just there. Waiting.

He ate in silence. Chewed slowly. Counted the days in his head.

Four days, if the river held.

Three, if the horses were rested.

Two, if they rode like knives.

After he finished, he went outside. The night had cleared. Stars had come back, brittle and sharp. The fig tree loomed against the slope, its roots gripping the earth like fists. He leaned against its trunk and waited.

Not for peace.

Not for forgiveness.

He waited to see whose name would be spoken last. His, or the one who sent fire to his soil. Either way, the ground would take them. And the stone would stand a little longer, soaked now not only in rain, but in what had begun to seep beneath it.

The morning came thin and sharp, like a blade drawn under cloth. No smoke rose from Rahimdad’s chimney. No footprints marked the mud near his gate. The village moved slowly, if at all. Doors creaked open only long enough to empty wash basins, feed goats, or call in children with too-loud voices. The mosque’s call to prayer rose weakly, its echo swallowed by the thick air. Akbarkhan stepped into the yard, rifle slung over one shoulder, knife tucked beneath his belt. His boots sank into the earth with each step. The rain had softened everything—except what was coming.

The poppy field was gone now, completely buried in ash and mud. Nothing would grow there again for years. But the slope still mattered. It was the edge of something, the line not between wheat and flower, but between the living and the watched. He stood there a moment, looking down the ridge. If they came from Khujan or from the eastern trails, they would follow the creek bed, cross through Farozai, then up behind the orchard wall. There was a pinch point—a narrowing of two hills where the path tightened between stone and thornbrush. He marked it in his mind. A place to break movement. A place to speak without words.

Anara came to him before midday. She held a roll of cloth in one hand, the other pressed into her side like something inside had begun to ache.

“You should go,” she said.

He didn’t answer.

“You can still walk out of this. You can leave. Live.”

He turned slightly, met her eyes. “You think it ends if I leave?”

“No. But it ends you.”

He shook his head. “It’s not just between me and him now.”

She let out a breath. “There are no ‘justs’ left. Only who dies first.”

He stepped past her, pulled the goat pen closed. The animals had begun to sense something too. They huddled tightly, eyes wide, stamping at the wet earth with nervous hooves.

“How many?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“They’ll burn the house.”

“Then we move before they reach it.”

“Where?”

“Stone bend. By the creek.”

Anara nodded. “I’ll gather what we can carry.”

“No. You stay.”

Her mouth tightened. “I’m not a child.”

“You’re all I have left.”

“And you think that’s more than nothing?”

He looked at her, not in anger, but with a heaviness that seemed older than the mountains around them. “You don’t need to be there when I kill him.”

She didn’t speak after that. She turned, went inside. The door did not slam.

By dusk, the signs arrived.

A rider passed far off along the ridge trail. Too fast for a trader. No pack animal. No greetings called to the fields. Akbar watched from the rocks, body flat to the earth, breath slowed. The man didn't stop. But his presence confirmed what they already knew—someone was measuring the slope. Someone was choosing where to come from, and how fast they could leave if it failed.

Akbar returned to the house by dark. Anara had placed bundles near the front wall: water skins, dried wheat cakes, three knives wrapped in cloth, and the worn family copy of the Qur'an. He said nothing. Neither did she. They ate a handful of rice between them, and then sat back-to-back beneath the hanging lantern. The wind outside picked up. There was no moon.

In the middle of the night, the goat with the crooked horn began to cry.

Not bleat.

Cry.

A sound dragged from the gut, full of fear and something else—warning. Akbar stood, took the musket, stepped into the yard. He didn't see them at first. Only the flicker of fire reflected off something metal—then a sound.

A foot slipping in wet earth. A branch snapped. Then a torch, suddenly lit, thrown high in the air, landing near the slope. Then another. Then five more.

Men came from the trees like wolves, low, fast, silent. Akbar didn't shout. Didn't run. He lifted the musket, aimed into the shadows. Pulled the trigger. The flash lit the world. One shape fell.

The others scattered. Behind him, Anara screamed. The fire caught in the lower brush. Flames leapt between thorn and grass. A second shot came—from their side now.

He dropped low, knife in hand, rolled behind the pen wall. Anara's voice again—louder this time, not fear but warning.

"They're at the back!"

A stone hit the wall beside him. Then another. Then fire. The sky above Ghulamabad glowed red. The feud had broken open. The war had begun.

The fire moved fast. Too fast. The brush behind the house had dried from weeks of wind and sun, and now it caught like paper, snapping upward in twisting tongues that licked the beams of the goat shed. Ash blew sideways across the yard, blinding, searing. Smoke pressed into his lungs with every breath. Akbarkhan crouched low behind the stone wall, fingers tight on the haft of his knife, and listened not for fire, but for feet—feet in mud, feet in panic, feet running toward what they thought was already theirs.

A scream split through the smoke—a voice sharp with pain, not fear. Then another. Akbar darted from the wall, circled wide toward the orchard trail, eyes stinging, knees cutting through scrub. Shapes flickered between the flames, not many—five, maybe six, but armed, moving like they had walked this route before. One had a long-barreled rifle slung across his back, wrapped in cloth. Another carried a sickle, the blade rusted but swinging clean through brush as he passed.

He caught one at the edge of the fig tree. A boy—no older than sixteen—crouching with a jar of oil, hand shaking as he tried to pour it along the stone base of the house. Akbar moved without sound. The blade met the side of the boy's neck, quick and quiet. The body collapsed with a soft grunt. Akbar didn't look at the face. Didn't check the name. There was no name in moments like this.

Inside, Anara had taken position near the window. He saw the glint of her eyes through the cloth she had tied over her face. She held the small iron blade used for skinning goats—both hands gripping it tight as if the handle might vanish if she let it go.

A stone crashed through the window. Glass and dust scattered. Then shouting—Rahimdad's voice, cracked and hoarse.

"Come out, Akbar! Come out and die like your father!"

Akbar stepped from behind the fig tree, blood still damp on his wrist.

"You want me," he shouted. "Then step forward and take me."

No answer.

Only the crackle of fire. Then footsteps shifting closer.

Then a voice from the dark: "You killed a boy over a goat."

"No," Akbar called back. "I killed a message. You sent the boy. You write the words."

Then a shot rang out—missed wide. Akbar ducked, rolled toward the far wall, came up crouched, heart pounding in his teeth. Another man charged—he saw the blade too late, raised his arm, took the cut across the forearm, deep, hot. The attacker overreached. Akbar slammed into him, drove the knife low, twisted until the man stopped moving.

Two left.

Maybe three.

He pressed a cloth to the wound, teeth clenched. Behind him, a scream—Anara.

He turned, bolted back toward the door. One man had entered. Not Rahimdad. Someone shorter, broader. He was dragging Anara by the wrist, shouting at her to open the back

store-room. Akbar didn't speak. He hurled a stone at the man's shoulder. The grip loosened. She twisted free, slammed her elbow into his face. He staggered—just long enough for Akbar to reach him.

The knife went in through the ribs. The man coughed once, stumbled, fell. Then came the voice—calm, too calm, behind him.

"You should've sold the field."

Akbar turned. Rahimdad stood in the doorway, musket raised, cloak soaked from the fire.

"You burned it," Akbar said.

"I warned you."

"You sent boys."

"You made yourself a king. Now you'll die as one."

Akbar took a step forward. Rahimdad steadied the barrel. A pause. Then Anara stepped between them.

"No," she said.

He didn't fire. She held her blade in both hands, not shaking.

"Move," Rahimdad said.

"I'll die before I let you shoot him."

Akbar didn't blink. His eyes flicked to the side—stones near the firewood. An old shovel. Then a scream from behind them—someone outside, yelling.

"Riders! From the ridge!"

All three froze.

Another voice: "Council's come! With men from Bagram!"

The firelight wavered. Hooves. Many. Close. Rahimdad's eyes darted to the door. Then back to Akbar. Then he ran.

No shot. No last word. He vanished into the smoke, feet pounding down the slope.

Akbarkhan stood still. The musket was gone. The house was scorched. His arm bled freely. Anara dropped the knife. The fire was dying. And now others would come—not just for judgment, but for what they had heard had grown on that field. The feud had opened the ground. And others had begun to smell the harvest.

Spin Ghar

By sunrise, the village was ringed with men. Horses stood tethered beneath the trees, stamping the earth, their flanks streaked with sweat from the climb. The riders wore mismatched gear—some in old tribal coats, others draped in loose khaki dyed with charcoal dust. These were not elders. Not villagers. Not kin. These were men hired to remember nothing, who sharpened their blades without asking whom they'd be sheathed in. Their leader, a lean figure with grey around the temples and one eye hidden by a blue cloth, stood by the edge of the mosque square, arms folded, gaze fixed on Akbarkhan's house.

The council had arrived before them but had not entered. The mullah's hands trembled around his prayer beads, and Usman sat on a low bench in silence, eyes following the movements of the strangers. No one dared ask who summoned them. The answer was already clear in the blackened field and the blood-streaked pen wall.

Akbar stood outside, cloak wrapped over the wound on his arm, face drawn but unbroken. Anara stood behind him, her hands reddened from binding the cloth, her eyes steady. They had said nothing since the fire had died. Only watched the road, the trees, the line of faces gathering at the edges of what once had been home.

The man with the blue cloth stepped forward. His voice was rough, but quiet.

"You are Akbarkhan."

"I am."

"You planted opium."

"I planted survival."

"You killed three."

"I buried two. One burned himself."

The man nodded slowly, expression unreadable.

"Where is Rahimdad?"

"Gone. He ran when the riders came."

A pause. Then a shift of weight. "We weren't sent for him."

Akbar's eyes narrowed. "Then for what?"

The man looked past him, toward the slope. The field. Now nothing but smoke-stained dirt.

“Word of your poppy reached us. Of your cut. Your method. They say it was clean. Thick heads. High resin.”

Akbar said nothing.

“They say you grew it with water from the old spring. That the sap ran hot even before the bulbs were scored.”

“They say much,” Akbar replied.

The man gestured. One of the riders brought forward a wrapped parcel—linen stained with dust. He laid it at Akbar’s feet and stepped back.

“For your loss,” the man said. “For your field. For what burned.”

Akbar didn’t move.

The man continued, voice lower now. “We’ve come to buy what’s left. Or what can be planted again. Not in revenge. Not in blood. In trade. You’ve proved the soil. You’ve proved your name can hold it.”

Akbar crouched slowly, unwrapped the parcel. Inside, silver. Heavy coins. Old and newer. Enough to buy a village. Or bury one.

He stood again. “What do you want?”

“A field. A man who knows how to grow it. Who can keep mouths shut. Who knows the price of silence.”

“And if I refuse?”

The man’s expression did not change. “Then someone else will grow it here. You will still live in this house, but the goats will not be yours. Your sister will still boil rice, but it won’t be from your sacks. And the next fire will not come at night. It will come in daylight, with names.”

Akbar looked past him. The village had gone still. No one stood in the square now. The council had turned their backs. Even the mullah stared at the stones beneath his feet.

He turned to Anara. Her face held no surprise. Only waiting.

He looked back at the man. “You’ll bring guards?”

“We will bring quiet. We will bring routes. You grow. We move.”

Akbar bent, picked up the silver. The weight surprised him. Cold. Real.

“You’ll leave the village out of it,” he said.

“We don’t know villages.”

“And you never came.”

The man smiled faintly. “We never do.”

He nodded once, turned, and walked back to his men. Mounts were drawn close, bridles lifted. Within moments, the riders were gone—no dust, no shout, no farewell.

Akbarkhan stood alone now, silver in hand, blood dried on his sleeve, smoke still clinging to the trees behind him.

He turned toward the slope.

And though the field had burned, the soil still lived.

And spring was not far.

The first rains came soft and sparse, almost hesitant, as though the clouds were uncertain if this land still deserved water. Akbarkhan stood barefoot in the blackened field, toes sinking into the loosened soil, his cloak pulled close against the wind that carried the scent of ash and thaw. He ran his hand across the dirt—not to test it, but to remember it. It no longer felt like a place of death. The burn scars had crusted over, and beneath them, the earth pulsed with readiness. He knew it the way a man knows when to speak and when to wait. This was soil that remembered pain, but still wished to grow.

Beside the old goat pen, the shed had been rebuilt in silence. Feroz had come two days after the riders left, shoulders hunched, his eyes not meeting Akbar’s, but his hands full of nails and boards. He said nothing. Just set the wood down and worked until the shape of the new shelter stood. After him, Basheer’s son brought straw, and an old widow left a jar of curdled milk without a word on the doorstep. The village had not forgiven. But it had resumed.

Anara was planting onions. She worked the rows in silence, veil pulled tight, her movements slow and stiff. The scar on her wrist from the raid had scabbed, but the bruises were still dark beneath the fabric. She said little to Akbar now, only what was needed. He didn't press her. They were not yet returned to the soft cadence of before. Something had shifted. But she stayed.

At night, he sat under the fig tree with the rifle across his knees. Not because he expected anyone, but because no one had told him to stop. The silence around him was no longer heavy with threat—it had changed into something more complex. The kind of quiet that surrounds a man who has become useful to people who don't wish to name him aloud.

Two weeks after the last flames, a boy came at dusk. Not from the village. He had the flat feet of a mountain child and the blank stare of one who had seen too many men die without screaming. He said only: “From Spin Ghar.” Then placed a pouch into Akbar’s hand and left

without waiting for reply. Inside the pouch were poppy seeds—new, darker, heavier than the last batch. Wrapped with them, a folded paper. No name. Just a weight. Just a number.

Akbar burned the paper and buried the ashes beneath the hearth.

He began planting at night.

Only a small patch, just enough to test the seed. The soil welcomed it. Within days, the first shoots rose, pale green fingers curling up through the dark. He watered them with the same care he'd once given to goats born in snowstorms. He touched the stalks like they were the bones of something he wanted to keep alive.

The neighbors said nothing. But sometimes, in the early hours, he would catch the flick of a head scarf vanishing behind a tree. Sometimes a man's cough carried across the slope when no one was meant to be awake. Still, no one came close. The stone boundary was left untouched. No blade scratched its surface. No rope was cut. The ground had become his through fire, not petition.

In the village square, the elders no longer called him by name. They nodded in his direction when he passed, like he was a distant storm that had turned away. Usman never spoke again in public, only watched from the steps of the mosque, lips moving in prayers no one asked to hear. The mullah still led the prayers but avoided Akbar's eyes. It was understood that some blessings required blindness.

One evening, Anara found him wrapping small bricks in goatskin. Her voice, when it came, held no heat—only weariness.

"Will it be wheat again, one day?"

He looked up, tied the last cord tight. "Maybe. If there's water. If there's time."

She didn't ask where the bricks were going. Or how much he was paid. She only stood there, arms crossed, watching the light flicker against his face.

"You've become something," she said. "I don't know what."

Akbar rose, placed the wrapped brick beside the door.

"Neither do I," he said. "But the ground knows me now."

She nodded, turned back to the stove.

The wind picked up outside.

And in the hills beyond, where no paths were marked and names were traded for weight and silence, others were planting, too. It had begun.

The cold returned earlier that year, creeping down from the northern passes like a patient thief. The mornings stiffened with frost by the third week of the planting, and the sheep bleated restless in their pens. Each breath left a cloud in the air. Akbarkhan rose before the sun, shoulders wrapped in two cloaks, hands cracked and dusted white at the knuckles. He worked the ridge with slow, deliberate movements, pushing the spade through half-frozen ground, planting the new seed in staggered rows along the slope's curve. He didn't sing. He didn't speak. Only the breath of the goats, the scrape of wood against dirt, and the steady hum of wind filled the mornings.

The field would not feed a family. It wouldn't be written about in ledgers. But the weight it could yield, sealed in tight bricks wrapped in sheep gut and waxed cloth, was measured in guns, grain, salt, and the kind of power that came without parades. He didn't think of it as a crop anymore. It was a message. Each bulb that swelled was an answer to the fire, the theft, the raid, the silence.

Once a week, a new boy came from the hills. Never the same twice. Always young, always quiet. They brought nothing except a glance, a single nod, sometimes a token—a string of dried apricot pits, a carved bone, a paper wrapped in leather with the smell of musk. Akbar never asked. He gave them what was prepared, pointed to the eastern path, and they left the way they came.

Anara no longer flinched when the boys arrived. She kept to the house, tended to the goats, milked them with a rhythm so practiced it looked like prayer. The cheese dried in low baskets, white and cracked, and she traded it with Basheer's wife for lentils and flour. The old order of life continued in patches. She did not ask how much coin was buried under the floor, nor did she mention the musket now kept clean by the stove.

One night, she stood in the doorway with her shawl drawn high, watching him tie the bricks into a reed basket. Her voice came like a thread through cloth.

"Do you ever dream of the old field?"

He didn't lift his head. "No."

"I do," she said. "It was gold, once. Before you tore it up."

"I didn't tear it," he said. "I traded it."

"For what?"

He tightened the last knot. "For control."

She nodded slowly. Then stepped back inside. The door creaked, then closed behind her.

That same night, two figures appeared near the ridge, not boys this time. Men. Not from Ghulamabad. They wore coats too fine for farmers, hands soft with the shape of pens, not sickles. Akbar met them at the path before they spoke.

“You’ve grown reputation,” said the taller of the two.

“I’ve grown poppy,” Akbar said.

“That too.”

The other man, younger, with rings on his fingers, spoke next. “We represent a route. South, then west. Not just through the old goat passes. We take weight farther. Kandahar. Maybe even beyond.”

Akbar stared at them. “I don’t go west.”

“You don’t need to,” the man said, tapping the side of his boot with a cane. “But your name is known now. They ask for you. By flower. Not by face.”

“I don’t sell my name.”

“You already did. First time you buried a boy and called it a warning.”

The silence was long. The wind cut between them, carrying the scent of frost and resin. Akbar finally nodded toward the trail.

“Take what’s ready. Leave the rest.”

“And next time?”

He met their eyes. “Send fewer words.”

They nodded, took the basket, and left without thanks.

He stood for a long time after they vanished into the dark, hands at his sides, breath visible in the cold. Behind him, the poppies trembled in the rising wind, leaves curling inward.

When he returned to the house, Anara had left a bowl of broth by the fire. She didn’t wake when he sat to eat it. Her breathing was even, slow. Outside, the goats shifted in their pen, restless beneath the stars.

He finished the broth, wiped his hands clean, then stepped out again into the dark. The fig tree loomed above him, black and still.

He knelt beside the stone, pressed a hand to the cold surface. The boundary had not moved. It had been buried deeper since the fire. Even the wind seemed to leave it untouched.

He whispered nothing. There were no prayers now. Only the field. And what it remembered.

Spring came late and slow, crawling over the mountains like a wounded thing, dragging warmth behind it one shallow breath at a time. The nights still froze, and the morning soil gave no promises. But by the fourth week of thaw, the first green broke through—the poppy leaves small and curled, their edges pale like new skin. Akbarkhan moved along the rows with his sickle tucked into his belt, not using it, only letting its shape press against his side as he worked. Each stem was measured by hand, each root patted firm into the damp earth. He didn't speak to the plants, but he watched them the way he once watched goats give birth—calm, intent, without expectation, knowing that death could arrive between one breath and the next.

The house had changed. A new door had been fitted, one that didn't creak. The outer wall, once scorched and pitted with smoke, had been replastered with mud and lime. Anara had painted blue rings along the bottom stones, like her mother used to do, a sign against envy. She said nothing about it, and he hadn't asked. But one morning he noticed a stone missing beneath the eaves, where the coins had been buried. Not all of them—just enough to buy grain, cloth, oil, thread. The message was clear: they would live without asking permission.

Spin Ghar arrived without sound, just as he had before—no warning, no name sent ahead, only the stillness of the road changing as he walked it. He wore the same faded turban, same ash-grey cloak darkened at the shoulders with travel dust, and the carved staff bound in leather that never once touched the ground in haste. He drank nothing offered. Sat beneath the fig tree without being asked. When he finally looked up at Akbarkhan, it was with the eyes of a man counting weight by glance, not gesture.

"The plants look strong," he said, low. "You've timed the watering well."

"They drink more than the goats," Akbar replied, settling opposite him, his shoulder still sore from tilling.

Spin Ghar looked over the ridge. "You'll have cut in six weeks. Sap will be thick."

Akbar shook his head. "I'm not waiting six weeks."

The man frowned, silent.

Akbar leaned forward, voice low. "Poppy takes a season. Bricks move slow. Coin moves slower. And the mouths behind me grow sharper than the knives we carry."

"You want to pull the plants?"

"No," Akbar said. "I want to grow what I grow. But I want more."

Ghar's eye narrowed slightly. "You ask for risk."

"I ask for coin."

“You already sell.”

Akbar’s voice tightened. “What I sell buys me salt. Nothing more. You send boys to carry my bricks, and I wait two weeks for half the weight in silver. That is not trade. That is charity.”

Ghar said nothing. The fig leaves stirred faintly.

“I have a plan,” Akbar continued. “There are others like me—villages, farms, high slopes above the passes, small fields with swollen heads. They plant, bleed the bulbs, wrap the bricks, and wait.”

“For buyers.”

“For thieves.”

Ghar watched him, saying nothing.

Akbar spoke softer now. “We take their bricks. Not by gun, not by fire. By silence. One night. One field. One weight.”

Spin Ghar exhaled once, no sound.

Akbar shook his head. “You serve weight. I serve survival. You’re a road. I’m a stone in the dust. Let me move, and I’ll pay you more than every farmer this side of Jalalabad.”

“Robbery draws blood.”

“Not if it’s never seen.”

“You think no one will talk?”

“They’ll look to their neighbours. Not to this ridge.”

Ghar tapped the end of his staff on the ground once. “You want me to be the crow.”

“I want you to be the wind.”

“And who’ll steal for you?”

“Me. One man, maybe two. I take only what won’t be missed. Or what won’t be claimed.”

“And when they trace it back?”

Akbar smiled faintly. “Then the dead can talk. But the dead don’t trade.”

A silence fell between them.

Spin Ghar finally leaned back, arms folding inside his cloak. “You want locations. Fields off the maps. Names that don’t reach the council.”

“I want what can’t be spoken aloud. I want the fields where the smoke never rises.”

The old man nodded once, slowly. “You’ll get it.”

“And I’ll pay weight.”

“No,” Ghar said. “You’ll pay silence.”

Akbar rose, the corner of his cloak dragging a line through the dirt. “You’ll have both.”

The fig tree shivered above them.

And somewhere beyond the ridge, another field waited for hands that would never ask permission.

Two weeks passed in the slow rhythm of soil and muscle. The poppy field stretched wider than before, its stems rising thick and green, nodding faintly with the push of the wind. Akbarkhan moved along the rows with a bucket in one hand and a flat-edged hoe in the other, clearing stones from the path where water slowed. His shirt clung to him with sweat, hands raw from the handle.

He muttered under his breath, pausing to rub his back. “Goats don’t bleed your knuckles. They eat, breed, and shit. You sell the meat, boil the bones, drink the milk. Food stays on the table.”

He flung a stone into the brush, wiped his brow.

“But still,” he said, watching the poppies sway. “Poppy brings more coin.”

That evening, just as the last light drained from the hills, a knock sounded—three short taps, followed by one longer. Akbar rose from the floor, lit the oil lamp, and opened the door.

Spin Ghar entered with a quiet grunt. His cloak was damp at the hem, dust on his sleeves. He carried a roll of goat-hide tied with cord. He unwrapped it at the table without a word. Inside was a map—rough, drawn by hand, creased and re-marked in charcoal.

He tapped the parchment. “These grow in the open, without guards. Poor security. Lazy planting. They sleep early, think they’re too far to be touched.”

Akbar leaned over the table. “Which are yours?”

Ghar’s finger moved to the western edge. “These I leave. I know their sons. I drank tea in their houses. We won’t touch them.”

“And these two?” Akbar asked, pointing to marks near the lower corner.

“Kallar Kahar,” Ghar said. “Fields are strong, near water, not well guarded. And Khakwal—on the flats, west of the river. Better yield. Less talk.”

Akbar studied the lines. “We ride tomorrow. Just one from your side.”

“Take Yahya,” Ghar said. “He doesn’t speak unless he’s bleeding.”

The next night, the wind shifted cold as they gathered. Yahya arrived with a heavy scarf around his face and two pistols tucked beneath his vest. He nodded once at Akbar and mounted without speaking.

They rode through the night, the hooves muffled over dry paths and loose shale. The mountain loomed above them like a silent judge, and neither man spoke as they climbed through the high pass. Hours passed. The stars turned. Somewhere far off, a jackal called. By the time they reached the ridge above Kallar Kahar, the moon had slid behind thin clouds.

They dismounted behind the boulders overlooking the valley. Akbar crouched low, scanning the shapes below.

“There,” he whispered. “First houses. See the rows?”

Yahya nodded. The poppy fields were dark, only their pale heads catching the faint shimmer of the moonlight, trembling slightly in the breeze.

Akbar adjusted the strap of his bag. “First we check for leftovers. If the last harvest left anything behind, they’ll have stored it for spring trade.”

Yahya followed close as they moved into the village, silent as wolves. The houses were old, mud-walled, smoke-blackened. A single lantern burned inside one home, flickering against

the shuttered window. Akbar ignored it, turning toward a low shed built with stone and timber.

He pressed his ear to the door. Nothing.

He slipped the latch. Inside, cool air, thick with the smell of dry wheat and goat dung. His eyes adjusted. Stacked cheese rolls wrapped in reeds. Two sacks of lentils. Clay pots of oil. And near the back, beneath a folded shawl—ten bricks.

He pulled one out, ran his fingers along the hardened edge, nodded.

“Take these,” he whispered.

They loaded the bricks into his cloth bag, careful not to clink them against the jars.

Yahya moved to the second shed, pried it open with a hooked blade.

“More,” he murmured.

Seven more bricks, stacked near bundles of dried fruit.

They made no sound as they moved, no word spoken between them as they slinked back to the trail and mounted once more.

By the time they reached Khakwal, the air had cooled sharply. The village sat flatter, its buildings spread wider along a shallow basin. Akbar motioned toward the far edge.

“Storage is always near the goats,” he said. “Scent keeps thieves away. Usually.”

In the first shed, they found nothing but tools and dried meat. In the second—fifteen bricks, wrapped in old shawls. In the third, beneath a floorboard Yahya kicked loose, twenty-five more.

Akbar’s bag bulged. Yahya tied his bundles across the saddle.

As they turned back toward the hills, the wind rose behind them, pushing cold against their backs. Yahya broke silence for the first time.

“We could do this every month.”

Akbar nodded, tightening his scarf. “No. Only once in a while. Let them think it’s bad luck.”

Yahya glanced over his shoulder. “They’ll blame their neighbours.”

“They always do.”

They rode back through the pass before dawn, heavy with weight and without sound.

The wind behind them carried no trail.

And Kallar Kahar slept on, unaware.

Next week they rode into the trading camp under a cloudless sky, the dust curling behind the hooves of their horses. The camp was pitched along a dry creek bed where flat carts sat in a wide half-circle, their wheels creaking softly as the wind pressed against canvas covers. A caravan from India had set up for the week—cloth merchants, salt traders, a few raw silk men—and near the center, under a shade cloth marked with a red emblem, stood two British officers flanked by Sikh guards, all boots and belts and measured tones. The air smelled of cardamom and horse sweat.

Spin Ghar dismounted first, tying his reins without looking. Akbar followed, his hand resting casually near his belt, where the knife sat hidden beneath his coat. Two of Ghar's men carried the sacks down, setting them gently on a tarp laid over the cracked earth.

The British officers stepped forward, one older, with a drooping moustache, and another younger, pale as goat milk, squinting as though the sun had just been invented. The older one spoke, his Pashto sharp-edged but understandable.

"You have the goods?"

Ghar nodded once. "Opium. Four bundles. Pure. Not stretched. Not burned."

The younger Brit poked a brick with the toe of his polished boot. "Looks small."

Akbar stepped forward. "We don't bring the packaging. Only the weight."

The older one crouched, pulled a small blade from his belt, cut into one of the bricks, and sniffed the edge. "Strong. Yes."

"Price is six hundred," Ghar said flatly.

The younger Brit blinked. "That's robbery."

Ghar didn't blink. "Then go find another bandit."

"We'll give you four-fifty. You didn't bring enough to demand more."

"You didn't bring a gun to take it," Ghar said. "Six hundred."

The Sikh guards stirred slightly. The younger Brit opened his mouth again, but the older one raised his hand.

"Six hundred," he said, standing. "But only because I need it gone before the rains."

Ghar nodded once. "You pay now."

The coins came in two cloth pouches, counted out in Afghan silver—overstruck rupees worth more than their face in the hills. Akbar watched each coin with the patience of a

farmer checking grain for rot. When the money was right, Ghar turned and handed out the shares without fuss. One hundred and fifty to each man. Folded into cloth, tied with cord.

As they rode from the camp, Ghar grunted, glancing back over his shoulder.

“They haggle like fishwives.”

“They’re still better than mullahs,” Akbar said, counting the weight in his pocket.

Ghar smirked. “This brings faster coin than a year of planting.”

“Faster, cleaner,” Akbar said. “No flood can ruin this.”

They rode for a while, silence broken only by the wind. Then Ghar looked ahead toward the ridge.

“We could go farther. North. South. Villages no one has touched. Some don’t even know the trade’s grown teeth.”

Akbar laughed once, sharp and loud. “I have an even better idea.”

Ghar raised an eyebrow.

“One day, when we’re bored of sacks and barefoot farmers—we rob a company warehouse.”

Ghar frowned. “Company?”

“The British,” Akbar said. “One of their fine godown stores with red flags and iron locks. Take the bricks, the cloth, whatever they hide. Then—” he grinned, “—we sell it back to them in the next valley.”

Yahya chuckled. One of the others spat into the dust.

“You’re serious?” Ghar asked.

“More serious than they are,” Akbar said. “They don’t know who they feed anymore.”

The men laughed. It was a deep laugh—earned, hard-edged, not wild but full of something old and bitter. The kind of laughter that grows in men who’ve taken something back from the world.

When Akbar returned home, night had already swallowed the slopes. Anara was seated by the stove, her hair braided, hands folded in her lap. He entered without a word, pulled back the goatskin rug near the wall, pried up the loose board, and placed the coins into the hollow beneath it.

She watched him quietly. “That new money?”

“Yes.”

“Will you bury more?”

“Maybe,” he said. “Depends how long we dig before we’re the ones buried.”

She stood, brushing her palms clean. “I need cloth for a new veil. The old one won’t last the spring.”

He nodded toward the boards. “Take what you need. If I fall on the road, better it’s used than rots.”

She didn’t smile. But she stepped forward, knelt beside the floor, and touched the corner of the cloth-wrapped silver without opening it.

“I’ll take only enough for the veil,” she said.

“That’s all we need,” Akbar replied, sitting near the fire.

Outside, the night wind moved the poppies gently in the dark.

And far off, across the plain, the dumb Britons counted their ledgers, unaware they’d already paid for what might soon be stolen back.

They met again under the fig tree, same place, same silence. Ghar sat with a rough cloth spread between them, stones placed to pin its corners, and his finger traced over the crude lines drawn there in charcoal.

“Udhampur first,” he said, tapping the mark. “Flat land. Easy to ride across. Last harvest, they had good sun—should be weight stored.”

Akbarkhan crouched, eyes scanning the trail marks on the map. “And Katra?”

“More scattered,” Ghar replied. “But they don’t sell quick. They wait for higher coin. That means storage.”

Akbar looked up. “Same crew?”

“Same four.”

“We go fast this time,” Akbar said. “Split once we’re in. No fire. No sound. We’re ghosts.”

Ghar nodded, but the line of his mouth didn’t bend.

By the next night, they rode out from the ridge, cloaked in silence, faces wrapped against the wind. Yahya rode at the front, his rifle slung in a sheepskin wrap across his back. The fourth man, Jamal, younger but sharp-eyed, rode behind Akbar. No one spoke after sundown.

They reached Udhampur near midnight, the village curled quiet in the folds of the land. A dog barked once, then nothing. No lamps burned. The poppy fields nearby rustled in the breeze—heads already scored weeks ago, sap drawn and likely wrapped in hiding.

They dismounted in the orchard west of the village, tying the horses low under apricot branches. Ghar turned to them, voice tight. “Quick. In, out. Take what’s packed.”

He and Jamal moved north toward a stone-walled storage built beside a grain tower. Akbar and Yahya went east, stepping over a collapsed fence and sliding behind a goat pen. The door of the shed gave with a low groan—inside, dry hay, sacks of millet, and a long wooden chest. Yahya pried it open with his dagger. Inside lay twenty-eight bricks, each wrapped in waxed cloth, marked with old charcoal signs.

Akbar grinned, his voice low. “Greedy fools. Storing it like dried cheese.”

They packed the bricks in silence, tied the bundles with rope, and slipped out as the night deepened. Ghar and Jamal were waiting near the tree line. Without words, they mounted and rode west toward Katra.

It was darker by the time they reached the second village. No moon now. Only the wind and the faint scent of smoke from dying hearths. They moved slow, horses tied to a low stone wall, each man crouched under his own shadow. The storage shed was set apart near the edge of the village. They approached together, all four, and Akbar gave the signal.

Yahya lifted the latch. The door creaked slightly as it opened. Inside, straw scattered the floor, and two broken baskets lay near the corner. But before any of them stepped in, the shed exploded with noise.

A goat lunged from the dark, bleating loud, eyes wild, rope trailing from its neck. It knocked into the baskets and kicked against the wall, hooves clattering against wood.

Akbar cursed under his breath. “Stupid beast—”

A door opened nearby. Feet scuffed the ground.

“Who’s there?” a voice called out.

Akbar grabbed Yahya by the arm, shoving him behind a stack of crates near the back wall. Ghar and Jamal slipped behind a wooden divider, pressed flat against the boards as footsteps approached. A man appeared in the doorway, knife in hand, holding a lantern high.

“I see you,” he said sharply, voice rising. “Show yourself!”

He stepped in, squinting at the shadows. The goat rushed past him and into the night. But the man froze. There—just the faintest movement behind the crates.

“You come out now!” he shouted, stepping closer. “I’ll cut your throats like chickens!”

Akbar didn’t wait. He moved like water—slipping from the dark and lunging forward. The knife in his hand caught the lantern’s glow just once before it struck. His blade buried in the man’s neck, just below the chin. A gurgle, a stumble, and the man dropped without sound. The lantern fell beside him and flickered.

The storage room went still again.

Ghar stepped out, face like stone.

“You killed him,” he said flatly.

“He saw us,” Akbar said, wiping the blade on the dead man’s sleeve.

“He had a knife. He was a farmer.”

“And I’m a thief,” Akbar replied, standing straight. “If you rob someone, be ready for something else to happen.”

Ghar stared at the corpse. “This wasn’t the plan.”

“The plan doesn’t breathe,” Akbar said. “He did.”

Jamal and Yahya had already begun pulling bricks from a shelf beneath the crates—forty, tightly stacked. They loaded them quickly, the silence thick with blood and sawdust.

When they rode out, no one spoke.

Not until the mountains swallowed them again did Ghar finally break the quiet.

“No more noise,” he said. “No more goats. Next time we send the goat to market first.”

Akbar let out a short laugh, sharp as iron. “Next time, we bring meat back too.”

The others laughed then—low and bitter, the kind of laughter meant to keep the dark from pressing too close.

Behind them, Katra slept, one man short. And no one would speak his name come morning.

The mountains kept their silence. But in the valleys below, a new kind of murmur had begun. Two villages struck in one week, both losing harvest with no signs of forced entry. No fire, no blood—until Katra. There, a man had been found in his shed, throat opened like a sheep. His widow said nothing, but others spoke. Whispers rose. Not of who did it, but of what it meant.

Baaz Khan

Back in Ghulamabad, Akbar sharpened his knife alone. The blade was thin now, worn down from use, the hilt wrapped in new cloth. It had taken him through four thefts, one killing, and half a dozen close calls in the dark. But he never named it. Tools don't need names.

Ghar hadn't come since Katra. No rider. No note. No boy sent down the ridge with a pouch of coin. The last bricks were gone, sold to a different caravan out near Kohat, according to Yahya. Akbar didn't mind. Coin was coin. What bothered him was the quiet.

He was in the goat pen, repairing a loose post, when Anara appeared at the edge of the yard, arms crossed. She hadn't spoken much in days.

"You hear?" she asked.

"No."

"They're gathering at the mosque."

"Why?"

"Three strangers in the village. They came at dawn. Asked for water, then names."

Akbar stood, dusted his hands. "Foreign?"

"No. Afghan. But not from here. One has a curved rifle. Other two keep looking at the poppies."

He nodded once. "I'll go."

At the square, the air was taut. Old men sat on the steps of the mosque, their prayer beads still but their eyes sharp. Usman, the elder, leaned on his cane, whispering low to the mullah. And beside the well stood three men—dusty, hard-faced, dressed in travel-worn robes that didn't match their words.

The tallest one turned when Akbar approached. His face was narrow, eyes pale and alert.

"You're the one with the field?" the man asked.

"I have a field," Akbar said.

"We came to buy."

"Not your kind of buyers," muttered someone behind them.

Usman coughed once. "They didn't come through us."

The stranger smiled slightly. “We go around councils. We go where the best weight is. We heard yours bleeds true.”

Akbar said nothing.

The man stepped forward. “Name’s Baaz Khan. From the east. Let’s speak where others don’t listen.”

Akbar nodded once. “Behind the goat pen.”

They walked through the narrow path, dry branches cracking underfoot. Baaz didn’t look around. “You’ve been making noise,” he said softly.

“Noise?”

“Not with your mouth. With your hands. Word travels. Fields missing product. A man dead.”

Akbar said nothing.

Baaz looked at him. “I don’t care. I like men who do more than plant. But someone else cares.”

“Who?”

“The ones you stole from,” Baaz said. “They think they were cheated by ghosts. But now they’re hearing whispers. Ghilzai man, silent sister, ridge with fig tree. That narrows things.”

Akbar’s hand dropped near his belt.

Baaz raised his own hand. “Easy. I didn’t come to threaten. I came with a proposal.”

“What kind?”

“You steal. I find. I know where the weight is. Big stores. Not farmer stacks. Caravan depots. Resting caches. You keep half. I take the rest.”

“You want me to risk and you take half?”

“I want you to live longer. Because the next men who come—they won’t talk. They’ll shoot.”

Akbar stared at him a long time.

Baaz Khan shrugged. “Think on it. I’ll be in Sra Rogha for three days. After that, I disappear.”

He turned and left, no goodbye, no second glance.

Akbar stood still under the fig tree. The goats bleated softly behind the fence.

And now it’s your move—where do we go from here? Accept Baaz? Investigate his truth? Hunt down those spreading whispers? Your turn to take the reins.

The next morning, a low mist hugged the ground, curling around the goat pens and drifting between the almond trees like a ghost unsure of its place. Akbarkhan stepped outside with a cold piece of flatbread in hand, chewing slowly as he watched the sun rise behind the broken ridge. The night's words still hung behind his eyes. Baaz Khan. A name that sounded too smooth to trust, yet not sharp enough to cut with right away.

He saddled the mare without saying a word to Anara. She didn't ask where he was going. Just stood in the doorway with a shawl around her shoulders, watching him knot the reins with the same hands that had once harvested wheat. She said, "I left water in the goatskin," then turned back inside.

By mid-morning, he was riding eastward alone, following the spine of the land until the trees thinned and the dust turned pale. The path to Sra Rogha wound through old smugglers' trails and dry riverbeds where wild mint grew in cracks. He didn't hurry. He stopped once to water the horse at a spring choked with moss. Once more to let it rest near a burned fig tree someone had left half-split, still clinging to its last green leaves.

He arrived at Sra Rogha by evening. The village was larger than most, pressed into the hills like a stone in a fist. The streets were narrow and crowded, with flat-roofed homes stacked over one another like teeth. Dogs barked as he passed. Women stared from behind wooden slats. But no one spoke his name.

He found Baaz Khan at the tea house, sitting cross-legged near the brazier with his boots off and a cup of steaming green tea in front of him. He was playing a quiet game of dice with a man Akbar didn't recognize—tall, thin, scarred on one side of his face like he'd slept too long near a fire.

Baaz looked up without surprise. "I didn't expect you."

Akbar sat across from him. "You talk too much to be a ghost."

Baaz smiled. "But I listen more than I speak."

"I'm not here to agree."

"I know."

"I'm here to hear names."

Baaz picked up the dice, rolled them once, and let them fall. "Three depots," he said. "Between here and Wana. Stored by Afghan smugglers, not Company. Weight left waiting for traders to return. No guards, just locals. Same kind of storage you already know. But more. Fifty, seventy bricks each."

Akbar's face stayed still. "How do you know they're real?"

“Because I used to be one of them,” Baaz said. “I helped fill them.”

“And now you want to steal them?”

“No,” Baaz said. “I want you to.”

The man with the scar stood without a word and walked off.

Baaz sipped his tea. “I lost something in this trade. Years back. Now I take pieces where I can. I don’t need much. But I don’t want my skills to rot. You want to keep moving weight, stay ahead of the talking mouths, and find real coin? Then we take one.”

Akbar said nothing for a long while. Then, quietly, “Which one first?”

Baaz reached into his coat and slid out a folded scrap of hide, etched in lines like a map burned half away. He tapped the lower mark.

“Near Shawal. A resting depot. They bring weight down from Spin, store it there, then send boys east. Right now, it’s full. Nobody’s watching. Traders are late. They won’t come for four more days.”

Akbar stared at the mark. “You come with me?”

“I show the way. I carry nothing. If we die, we die. If we win, you earn.”

Akbar stood. “Be ready tomorrow night.”

Baaz smiled and bowed his head slightly.

As Akbar left the tea house, he passed the man with the scar leaning against a post, sharpening a short blade with a riverstone. The man said nothing, only watched him with one eye, the other hidden behind puckered skin.

Akbar kept walking. He had seen that kind of face before.

Fire had made it. Just like his own name was now starting to make shadows in the dark.

They set out the next evening with no farewells and no prayers. Baaz rode a pale grey horse, thin but fast, and carried no visible weapons. He wore the same dust-stained cloak, but this time with a fresh patch sewn over the left shoulder—faint green thread, out of place. Akbar noticed, but said nothing. They traveled light, just the two of them, no extra riders, no pack mules. The mountains would not allow for a heavy ride.

The trail toward Shawal bent south, then curled hard east through dry ravines and old river cuts where goat herders had once marked the stone with black soot and salt signs. The air grew colder, cleaner. By midnight, frost formed on the horsehair. Baaz said nothing for most of the ride, only stopping once to adjust the bag under his saddle.

“We approach from above,” he said at last. “There’s a ridge overlooking the valley. Depot is near the old mosque ruin. No guards. Just a boy or two that sleep deep if the dogs don’t bark.”

Akbar nodded, flexing the fingers on his left hand, where the cold had started to settle in. “Dogs?”

“One, maybe two. I’ve fed them before. If they’re the same, they’ll follow food.”

They reached the ridge by the last hour of the night. Below, the faint shapes of buildings—mud-brick, low, slanted from years of weight and weather. The depot sat nearest to the collapsed mosque, its roof covered with dried grass and flat stones to break the wind. A fire burned low in one courtyard nearby. Faint shadows moved—a man smoking a pipe, a boy washing his feet. But the depot itself was quiet.

Baaz dismounted, handing Akbar a roll of dried meat. “Throw it toward the far wall when you see the dogs.”

Akbar took it without a word and checked his knife. The flintlock stayed in his belt. No gun tonight, not if silence was still their shield.

They moved down the slope slow, one at a time, broken into shadow. A dog barked once from behind the far hut, then went quiet when the meat hit the stones. Baaz veered toward the side wall, where a small stack of clay pots blocked part of the entrance. Akbar went straight for the main storage door, low and banded in rusted iron.

It opened with a dry creak, but nothing loud. Inside, the smell of raw opium was heavy—sweet and thick, like crushed poppy sap mixed with goat oil and leather. The room was darker than a cave, but his hands found the stacks. Bricks. Many. Cloth-wrapped, neatly laid in rows along wooden planks. Akbar reached and counted by feel. Eight… ten… twelve… more. He kept going. Twenty… thirty-five… fifty-two.

Baaz entered behind him, lit a small oil-soaked wick in a cracked bowl.

“Seventy-three,” he whispered, eyes flashing. “They stored everything here.”

Akbar said, “No carts. No mules. We take what we can.”

They loaded quickly—Akbar taking a long rope and looping twenty bricks into a tight roll, strapping it to his back. Baaz tied another fifteen under his saddlebag. They repeated the process until the horses could carry no more without slowing.

“Leave the rest,” Baaz said. “They’ll think rats took the rest, or rival sons.”

Akbar paused before the door, eyes sweeping the bricks. “Let them guess.”

They mounted in silence, and just as the sky began to shift toward morning—no light, just a fading of stars—they rode out through the dry gulley, winding west toward the upper ridge trail.

No one followed.

By the time they made camp near a frozen stream three hours later, their horses were sweating and winded. Baaz dismounted with a grunt and crouched near a rock.

“You don’t ask questions,” he said, breaking the silence.

“I don’t like answers.”

Baaz grinned. “You remind me of a man I once knew. Killed a smuggler with a tea spoon. Said the knife would’ve been too kind.”

Akbar said nothing. He checked the rope bindings again, tightening the bricks.

Baaz stood, shaking dust from his cloak. “We sell in two days. I know the route. They won’t haggle.”

“I want weight in hand,” Akbar said. “No delays.”

“You’ll get it,” Baaz said. “But after this…”

Akbar looked at him.

Baaz’s grin faded. “After this, someone will come asking questions. This depot was too full. Too well known. We’ve moved from thieves to disruptors.”

Akbar nodded. “Then we don’t stop.”

Baaz paused. “Not all men can keep stealing once the blood begins.”

Akbar leaned back, eyes on the grey ridge. “The day I buried my father, I’ve only been a blade waiting for something to touch it.”

Baaz said nothing.

The wind picked up again.

And in the distance, the valley held its breath, waiting to see what would fall next.

Baaz rode off the same way he had arrived—silent, sure, and without weight on his conscience. The bricks were packed tight under his saddle and strapped along his mare’s flanks, wrapped in a tarp dusted with ash to look like coal. He promised to return in three days. Said the buyers were waiting near Thall. Said they'd deal quick and clean. Said there was no reason to follow.

Akbar watched him disappear behind the ridge.

Three days passed.

Then four.

A week. Nothing.

The valley air grew colder. Frost crusted the watering troughs, and the goats began to huddle tighter at night. Akbar sat by the hearth, not moving, staring at the coals as they cracked in the stone pit. He hadn't touched the floorboards under which his last silver lay. He hadn't spoken to Anara beyond what needed saying. The knife sat next to the bread on the table. The flintlock was cleaned twice, even though it hadn't been fired in weeks.

On the morning of the eighth day, Akbar wrapped his scarf tight, slipped the flintlock into his coat, slid the knife into the leather sheath at his hip, and stood up from the low stool.

Anara looked up from sorting lentils. "Going?"

"I'm done waiting."

He walked to the edge of the village and knocked on Daud's door—an old herder whose sons had long since gone east. Daud opened with suspicion in his eyes, but when Akbar asked for the horse, he nodded. "Bring it back," he said.

Akbar didn't promise.

The road was quiet. He rode north first, following the old trader's path that snaked through dry ravines and brittle wheat fields, asking quiet questions at every tea stall, every smoke-blackened chai house tucked under ledges. No one had seen a man matching Baaz Khan's description. Some shrugged. Others looked away too fast.

After four days of searching, Akbar was riding along a broken mountain path when he saw a figure ahead, mounted, moving slowly over a ridge of rock and thistle.

He kicked Daud's horse forward.

As he neared, the rider turned. The old cloak. The staff tied to the saddle. The same sharp-eyed face, only now wearier, the skin around the eyes darker.

Akbar reined in beside him.

"Where have you been?" he asked. "We have work to do."

Spin Ghar narrowed his eyes. "I had to vanish. For a time."

"Who?"

“Some fools from Kohat. Thought I sold them bricks that vanished in smoke. I didn’t. But it doesn’t matter when knives are drawn.”

Akbar nodded once. “Baaz has vanished. With seventy bricks.”

Ghar’s face didn’t move. “Gone where?”

“Said he had buyers near Thall. Promised to return in three days. That was nine days ago.”

Spin Ghar exhaled, a sound that was more throat than lungs. “You trusted him too much.”

“He talked too clean to be honest. I knew it. But the offer smelled like coin.”

Ghar looked over at the thin-legged borrowed horse. “You’re chasing thieves on that goat with hooves?”

Akbar smirked. “It got me here.”

Ghar chuckled low. “You’ve made more silver than any three men in this range. Buy a damned horse.”

“I will,” Akbar said. “But not before I buy the name of the man who finds Baaz.”

Ghar nodded. “Then let’s ride.”

They rode together into the pass, the trail widening slightly where water once flowed, now dry. The sky above was cloudless, the sun sharp. Villages came and went. They stopped at inns where only dust lingered in cups, where women stirred rice without looking up, where boys carried water from the well and pretended not to listen.

Everywhere they asked, the answer was the same.

No one had seen him. Not the man with the pale eyes. Not the one who spoke Pashto like he wasn’t born to it. Not the man with a grey mare and a smile you couldn’t trust.

At one smokehouse on the edge of Mohmand hills, an old man looked up from the coals. “A man passed here,” he said. “Riding hard. Days ago. Didn’t stop to eat. Had a scar on one cheek and rode with eyes like he feared ghosts.”

“That’s not him,” Akbar said.

“No,” Spin Ghar added. “That sounds like the man *with* him.”

The trail grew colder.

But Akbar’s stare grew harder.

And as they left the village behind, Ghar asked, “If you find him… what then?”

Akbar's answer came without pause.

"I take the weight from his body. Brick by brick."

They reached Thall as the sun dropped behind the last ridge, washing the hills in smoke-colored gold. It was a rougher town than most, spread low against the plain, full of traders who carried coin on their belts and knives under their tongues. Akbar and Spin Ghar left their horses tied near the tea stalls and walked the dusty alleys until they found an old man crouched against a mud wall, knees drawn to his chest, eyes half-closed as he pulled deeply on a long wooden pipe heavy with hashish.

Akbar crouched beside him, voice low. "We're looking for someone."

The man didn't open his eyes. "Aren't we all?"

"He rode a pale horse. Carried large weight."

"Hmm," the old man grunted, smoke curling from his lips. "Saw such a man. Four days back. Looked tired. Rode like he hadn't slept."

Ghar leaned in. "What happened to him?"

The old man tapped ash into the dust. "Didn't go far. Four men followed him from the hills. Pounced outside town. Dragged him off like a goat thief. He screamed, but only once."

"Where did they take him?" Akbar asked.

The man looked up, one eye milky white. "Toward Shawal."

Akbar stood, jaw set. "Ghar. The depot."

Spin Ghar spat into the dust. "That's where they took the bricks from him. And now they want more."

They rode out within the hour, the horses running hard until the moon climbed behind them. It took two days through broken hills and dry gulches, traveling light, eating little, speaking even less. When they reached the familiar slope above the old depot, the wind blew west and the valley below sat silent, just like the first time—except now, one horse grazed loosely near the side of the ruined house.

Akbar reined in. His voice was sharp, quiet. "It's him. He's there."

The empty sacks flapping along the saddle sides told the rest.

They dismounted and crept low along the slope. Ghar's flintlock was already primed. Akbar loaded his with a steady hand, eyes never leaving the door below. They slid down behind the outer wall, boots muffled in the dust. Inside the house, a scream rose—raw, wet, and short.

Akbar nodded once.

They moved.

He kicked the door in with a heavy boot, the hinges splitting wood as it slammed open. The room inside stank of blood and sweat. Baaz Khan sat tied to a chair in the center, his face broken and mouth filled with blood. Ropes cut into his arms. His head jerked up as the door flew open.

Behind a table to the right sat a heavy man, knife still slick in his hand. His eyes widened just as Akbar raised the flintlock and pulled the trigger.

The room burst in a cloud of smoke and flame. The round struck the man above the eye. He dropped backward with the chair, skull cracking against the wall.

From the far corner, another man leapt up—ragged coat, pistol tucked in his belt. Ghar didn't wait. He fired into the man's gut at close range. The shot thudded through flesh and he fell against the wall, sliding down in a wet heap.

A third man came screaming from behind a curtain, blade in hand, rushing straight for Akbar.

"No time," Akbar muttered, dropping the spent flintlock and drawing his knife.

The man slashed across Akbar's chest, tearing through his shirt and skin. He grunted, stumbled back, then pivoted left, ducked the second blow, and drove the knife deep into the man's ribs. He twisted, felt the bone crack. The man gasped once, then dropped.

A scream sounded from outside. Ghar was on the ground, a fourth attacker on top, fists pounding into his face. Blood flew. Ghar growled low, then drove his own blade up into the man's belly. The man twitched, choked, and fell limp across him.

Ghar shoved the body aside and stood, panting.

Akbar staggered over to Baaz, wiping blood from his chest, and cut the ropes free.

Baaz slumped forward, gasping, eyes swollen shut, mouth torn. "You came back," he rasped.

Akbar pulled him upright. "Speak later. Move now."

Baaz coughed, nodding. "I—I tried to sell. I swear. They knew me. Took me, took everything. Said they'd carve names into my skin if I lied."

"You're lucky we found you first," Ghar said, wiping blood from his cheek.

They slipped outside into the darkness, Baaz leaning on Akbar as they made their way past the dead horse. Inside the old depot, the bricks had been piled again—some unwrapped,

most untouched. Akbar and Ghar each took what their horses could carry. Baaz, though bleeding, insisted on loading his own.

They rode out under the starlight, no words, the wind cold against the blood drying on their skin. Baaz, broken in the saddle, muttered softly, “I owe you. I’ll earn back the weight. All of it.”

Akbar didn’t answer.

He just rode harder, eyes fixed on the horizon, where no deals were safe and only silence kept a man alive.

The caravan was pitched outside a narrow gorge two valleys west of Gumbat, where traders gathered in the dry season before crossing into Punjab. Tarps flapped low over wagons. Smoke rose from small cooking fires. Men crouched near hookah pipes, their laughter thin, half-hearted, wary of strangers. Akbar, Ghar, and Baaz rode into the outer ring with saddlebags heavy and jaws tight.

An Indian trader with dyed beard and long grey coat came forward. His eyes were sharp. “You bring cloth? Salt?”

Baaz dismounted first, slow and limping. “We bring sleep,” he said. “Night sleep.”

The trader’s eyes narrowed. “Show.”

They opened one sack, revealing the first bricks—sealed tight, still stamped with the faded mark of the Shawal depot. The trader whistled low. “This is not village weight.”

Akbar stepped forward. “Do you want it or not?”

The man paused, then waved to a boy nearby. “Count it.”

The boy crouched, unwrapping the edges, sniffing, prodding, stacking with care. After a while he stood. “Seventy-three. Pure.”

The trader nodded once. “I’ll give nine hundred.”

“Eleven,” Baaz said.

The man frowned. “For stolen opium?”

Akbar leaned closer. “For bricks you’ll sell for fifteen. You pay eleven or you buy nothing.”

They stared at each other a long moment. Then the trader nodded to the boy again. “Bring coin.”

When the deal was done, the silver was split. Baaz stepped aside, his face still bandaged, bruises deepening under his eyes. He held his share in one hand, then walked over to Akbar and pressed it into his palm.

“Yours,” he said. “You came through fire for me. I don’t forget that.”

Akbar didn’t protest. He only nodded once, slipping the cloth pouch under his belt.

By dusk, the crew had gathered on a ledge overlooking the low gorge, the mountains spreading out below like old skin. Jamal sat sharpening his blade with a sliver of sandstone. Yahya chewed on dry meat, watching a hawk turn slow circles above. Two new men had joined—Tahir, quiet and long-armed, with a scar that cut across his nose like a knife drawn too early, and Farooq, older, lean, with sharp teeth and a voice like gravel. Both came from the Khost passes, where the winters make boys into bones fast if they don’t learn to steal.

Spin Ghar stood over a rough drawing scratched into dirt with a stick. “Next site’s near Qila Saifullah,” he said. “Old storage left behind after the company stopped buying there last season. Locals kept it full hoping the trade would restart.”

“How many bricks?” Farooq asked.

“Eighty, maybe more,” Ghar said. “We don’t take all. Fifty. Leave the rest so it doesn’t raise alarm.”

Baaz leaned in. “Two go in. Fast. Others stay above with rifles.”

“When?” asked Jamal.

“Three days,” Akbar said. “We rest. Then ride. Too many eyes now. Let dust settle.”

They agreed.

After three days of cold sleep, sour goat broth, and quiet sharpening of tools, they rode west, a silent column of seven, faces wrapped, voices low. They crossed through dry ravines, narrow goat tracks, one night sleeping among thornbrush when the wind turned sharp. When they reached the rise above the depot near Chenab Nagar, night had already fallen. The village below slept under thin cloud. No dogs barked. No fire burned.

Akbar and Farooq went down.

The storage house was unguarded, the door shut only with a length of rope looped through two nails. Inside, the air was thick with resin and dust. Bricks lay stacked on wooden shelves, wrapped tight. They worked quickly, hands practiced, saying nothing. Fifty bricks. No more.

On the ridge above, Ghar kept watch with his rifle across his knees. Yahya sat beside him, listening for any sound beyond the wind. Jamal, Baaz, and the others watched the shadows stretch and fade.

When Akbar and Farooq reappeared, sacks full, Ghar only said one word.

“Move.”

They rode straight through the night, the sky heavy above them, the mountain wind pressing against their backs. No pursuit came. No shots rang out.

Near the edge of Chenab Nagar, they stopped at a shallow stream to water the horses. Farooq leaned against a rock, wiping sweat from his brow.

“No blood this time,” he muttered. “Maybe our names haven’t reached here yet.”

Baaz, still bruised but sharper now, said, “Names travel slower than bullets. But they catch up eventually.”

Akbar looked down at the water, then across the hills where morning would soon arrive.

“For now,” he said, “we stay ahead.”

They rode tight through the high pass just before dusk, hooves striking rock and stone as wind whistled along the narrow bends of the mountain trail. Below them, the land dropped into ravines thick with thorn and shadow. Ahead, the path bent around a ledge flanked by dry scrub and boulders stacked like sleeping giants.

That’s when the shapes emerged. Twelve of them.

They blocked the trail without warning. Men with flintlocks slung across shoulders, others with knives tucked into wide cloth sashes. Their faces were sun-hardened, marked by wind

and blood—tribesmen from the south, rough coats, pale turbans, eyes that had seen death and were ready to hand it back.

The one in front dismounted first. He was broad, grey-bearded, with a limp in one leg and a short axe strapped at his back. He walked forward a few steps, then stopped and raised his voice.

“I know you!”

His words echoed off the rocks.

“You murdered my brother in Shawal! Took our bricks—slaughtered three of my kin like dogs. You thought no one would follow, but the dead don’t stay buried forever.”

Akbar’s eyes narrowed. He slowly reached toward his flintlock.

The old man raised his own pistol and roared, “Blood requires blood, bastard!”

He fired.

The shot cracked the air and slammed into Jamal’s horse, just above the front chest. The beast screamed, reared, then crashed sideways into the trail, kicking wildly. Jamal jumped free, rolling over dirt and loose stones as blood soaked the dust.

Then chaos.

Gunfire erupted like thunder rolling down a canyon. Muzzle flashes blinked from behind rocks—white sparks and thick curls of smoke pouring out with each shot. The attackers scattered fast, slipping behind cover, ducking low, reloading quick.

Akbar and his men dropped from their saddles, scrambled behind jagged boulders that dotted the right edge of the pass. Yahya fired first, his flintlock booming as he dropped one of the enemy lunging for better ground. The man tumbled backward, limbs twisted.

Baaz rolled beside a bush, already packing powder into his barrel with shaking hands. “They were waiting! They knew the trail!”

“Keep their heads down!” Ghar yelled, firing toward a flicker of movement. His shot missed, kicking up dust near the feet of a crouching man who returned fire. The round clipped the edge of the rock beside Ghar’s face, peppering him with stone chips.

“Left side!” Farooq shouted. “Two moving down!”

Akbar leaned from behind his rock, lifted the flintlock, and fired. The blast roared and one of the figures on the left dropped, his flintlock skittering away on the stones. Another man cried out, crawling into brush with blood pooling beneath him.

Smoke now hung across the trail like fog from the underworld. Screams and echoing shots mixed with the shrieks of wounded horses.

A sharp crack rang out from the ridge above—Tahir had climbed higher, firing down from elevation. He dropped another of the enemy mid-run, the man twisting with a scream before slamming into the rocks.

Akbar turned, looking for Jamal—only to see his body slumped behind a fallen horse, two rounds in his chest, unmoving.

“Jamal’s gone!” Yahya cried.

“No time!” Baaz shouted back, reloaded. “They're flanking!”

Two of the enemy were pushing right, circling through brush with curved blades drawn. Ghar saw them and dropped his empty gun, pulling his knife. He lunged from behind his rock, met the first with a shoulder slam, and drove his blade into the man’s throat. The second slashed Ghar’s arm but was brought down by Yahya, who struck him with the butt of his spent pistol.

But then another shot rang. A bullet slammed into Farooq’s back as he tried to move between rocks. He fell to his knees, then crumpled forward without a word.

The fight was grinding, brutal—smoke too thick to see more than a few paces, ears ringing from the blasts. Akbar grabbed a second pistol from Jamal’s belt and stepped over the fallen horse. He fired at a shadow darting between rocks—the man pitched sideways with a hole under his chin.

Then silence.

One man tried to run, breaking for the ridge—but Tahir dropped him clean with a final shot from above. The rest lay scattered—some groaning, others still.

It was done.

Akbar stood breathing hard, blood on his coat, hair wet with sweat and dust. Ghar crouched near Farooq’s body, touching his shoulder once before standing and wiping blood from his knife.

Jamal and Farooq were gone.

Seven had ridden into the pass. Now five remained.

Baaz limped to the trail, wiping soot from his face. “They knew we’d pass this way,” he said. “Someone talked. Someone knew.”

Akbar looked over the fallen, then down the trail.

“We ride,” he said. “We bury the dead later. If we stop now, more will follow.”

Yahya spat into the dirt. “We’re not thieves anymore. We’re war.”

Akbar looked at the blood on his hands, then toward the dusk ahead.

“No,” he said. “We’re debt.”

Akbar took his horse, tightening the reins and checking the saddle while the others gathered what little they had left. Ghar crouched beside Farooq’s body, tying a cloth over the man’s eyes before they covered him with loose stones. There was no time to bury him deep. The trail needed clearing, the air was thick with blood, and somewhere behind them, someone else might already be riding fast.

They moved west through a goat track that cut under the ridgeline, avoiding open ground. The sun dropped behind the hills, and they didn’t light torches. When they reached the fork beneath the high ridge, Akbar stopped, reins in hand.

“I go alone,” he said. “She can’t stay there.”

Ghar only nodded. “We’ll reach the cave. North side of the ridge. You’ll see smoke when you climb. No fire till nightfall.”

Akbar turned without another word and rode hard.

The path cut across loose shale and dry pine groves, where owls stirred at his passing. The stars burned above the peaks. He passed a dry riverbed, then the twisted fig tree, and knew he was close.

He arrived before dawn.

The door creaked as he entered. The room smelled of oil, goat dung, and cold clay. Anara was asleep beneath two stitched wool blankets. He stepped close, hand to her shoulder.

She woke with a start, blinking. “Akbar?”

“Dress. Now.”

“What happened?”

He walked across the room, knelt, and pulled the floorboards. The silver was still there, wrapped in oiled cloth. “They came for us. Men from Shawal. Jamal is dead. Farooq too.”

She was silent a moment. Then she stood, already reaching for her scarf.

They rode out with no food, no water, no farewell.

By afternoon they reached the ridge. The cave mouth was hidden by scrub and wind-blown stone. A single coil of smoke curled into the sky—thin, cautious. As they climbed the slope, Anara clutching him from behind, he saw Baaz crouched at the fire, tending a stick that turned slowly in the coals. A goat was skewered over it, half-scorched, blood dripping to the ash.

Yahya sat nearby, skin still grey from exhaustion, muttering verses from the Qur'an under his breath. Tahir was checking weapons, knife laid across his lap. When they saw Akbar, no one stood. Only nods passed between them.

Anara stepped down from the horse, looked once around the cave, and moved silently to a corner where folded cloths had been laid. She didn't speak.

Baaz gestured to the roasting meat. "He climbed half a cliff for it," he said, nodding toward Tahir. "It bit him twice."

Tahir raised his hand. Two deep marks on his wrist.

They ate with their fingers, heads down, no words passed between bites. The meat was hot, dry, but real. Smoke filled the space. Anara ate slowly, away from the rest, her eyes watching the stone wall instead of faces.

Then the time for prayer came. The men rose without needing to speak. They formed a line in the narrow flat near the back of the cave, facing west where the ridge split toward Mecca. One by one, they raised their hands.

"Allahu akbar," they said.

They bowed, kneeled, touched forehead to stone, rose again.

"Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem…"

Their voices blended into the flicker of the firelight and the wind that whistled faintly outside. When they were done, they folded their scarves tighter and lay down on the hard ground. No blankets. No peace.

Akbar sat longer than the others, staring at the dying embers, the steel of his knife glinting faintly in the ash-light.

He spoke into the silence.

"Caravans."

Baaz, half asleep, blinked. "What?"

"No more storehouses," Akbar said. "No more field sacks or quiet walls. We take what moves. Where the coin travels. If they're moving goods, we take them."

Baaz scratched his beard. “You’re talking guards. Guns. Men with long rifles and pack camels.”

Akbar nodded. “Then we kill them fast. They guard silk and copper and medicine. Sometimes poppy. Everything sells to someone.”

Yahya stirred from his corner. “You’ve gone mad.”

“Maybe,” Akbar said. “But we’ve become names now. There’s no more hiding. The blood we spilled will follow us. We can’t turn farmers again. But we can grow rich before we die.”

Spin Ghar raised his head. “I know the road.”

They turned toward him.

“There’s a cutpath through the eastern valleys—south of Hangu. Every week caravans pass. Company goods sometimes. Indian traders. They move fast, don’t stop. But there’s a bend where the road drops into a hollow. Easy to trap.”

Akbar nodded. “Mark it. We’ll plan the strike.”

Spin Ghar stood and buckled his belt. “I’ll ride now. Bring three men from Ghulamabad. Ones who don’t talk.”

“Good,” Akbar said. “Seven’s too few.”

Baaz smiled faintly, voice dry. “Ten die just as fast.”

Spin Ghar turned at the cave mouth. “So do ten others.”

Then he vanished into the dusk, hooves thudding down the ridge trail.

The fire hissed as fat from the goat dripped onto coals. No one spoke.

Outside, the wind scraped the stone like knives drawing across old scars.

They stayed in the cave for four more nights, unseen and mostly unheard, the smoke drawn carefully into the higher cracks where it vanished with the wind. In the mornings, Baaz would climb to the ridge to watch the low trails for movement. At night, the men cleaned their weapons, restuffed powder horns, and listened to Yahya read aloud from his memory, verses broken by long silences.

Anara spoke little. She swept ash from the corners, boiled what little lentils they had, patched the edge of Akbar’s tunic where the knife wound from Katra had torn it months ago. No one asked her to do these things. She simply did them.

On the fifth day, hooves echoed through the rocks and Spin Ghar returned with three riders at his back.

“These are men who work for food or silver,” he said, dismounting. “Whichever comes first.”

The first was Rafiq, heavy in the face but strong-armed, the kind of man who smiled even after drawing blood. The second, Aslam, had only one eye, the other lost to fire, and a habit of grinding his teeth when thinking. The third, Salim, was the quietest of all, gaunt, wolfish, and moved like he’d never stood still in his life.

Introductions were brief. All three looked at Akbar with measured eyes.

“Caravan work, is it?” Rafiq asked.

“Yes,” Akbar said. “Fast and rough. In and out before their lungs fill with air. We strike at the bend, then vanish west.”

Spin Ghar spread out a cloth and drew in the dirt with a twig.

“Here,” he said, pointing to a slope. “This cliff overlooks the road. A hollow cuts across just below. The traders stop there sometimes, to rest the camels before the climb.”

“How many guards?” asked Yahya.

“Depends. Some have five. Some ten. But the Company caravans… those can carry twenty. They ride behind, always alert. They move silver, opium, rifles, even clocks.”

Baaz spat. “Then we hit the smaller ones.”

Akbar nodded. “First we test.”

Two days later, they rode down in silence.

They crossed shale ridges where no grass grew, passed villages that had never heard their names. Each night they camped far from the road, and each morning they watched the path from high ground. Dust trails rose like smoke on the third day—two camels, three wagons, and seven men walking alongside, two on horseback. One wore a red sash, one had a matchlock slung over his shoulder.

Spin Ghar narrowed his eyes. “Indians. Not Company men. Cloth and iron, likely.”

“Just enough to make it worth it,” said Akbar.

They waited till twilight. The caravan entered the hollow just as the sun died. The lead camel groaned, and the whole line slowed as one of the men signaled a break. Fires weren’t lit. The men unpacked bread, smoked quietly, and tied the camels to low scrub.

Akbar raised his hand.

From the ridge, Yahya and Tahir already had flintlocks leveled. Baaz crouched beside Akbar, watching the edges for scouts. Rafiq and Salim had crept down lower, hidden behind scrub.

Akbar counted softly under his breath. Then he whispered:

“Now.”

Shots rang out. Two of the guards dropped where they sat, one with a hole through his chest, the other screaming, clutching his leg. Before the others could rise, Akbar was already charging downhill with Baaz and Aslam behind him. Flintlocks fired again. Camels screamed. One trader reached for a blade but fell with Rafiq’s knife in his throat.

“Don’t run!” Baaz shouted. “Drop the weapons!”

Two guards obeyed. One didn’t, firing wildly up the ridge—Tahir ducked, missed by inches, and returned fire. The last standing man fell onto his back, mouth open, smoke still curling from his pistol.

The whole ambush lasted less than a minute.

When the dust cleared, five guards lay dead, two traders surrendered, hands shaking. Akbar searched the wagons: bolts of cloth, small copper dishes, two crates of dried tea, and a hidden compartment near the second cart—27 wrapped bricks of opium under a false floor and a bag of silver.

Baaz grinned wide. “We don’t need poppy fields anymore.”

Akbar nodded slowly, watching the dusk fade.

Spin Ghar turned to the remaining traders. “You speak?”

One man nodded quickly.

“You will walk home,” Akbar said. “Tell no one. If we hear otherwise, we return.”

The men fled into the dark.

That night, they camped far off the trail, sharing tea boiled over a small flame. Anara sat quiet beside the fire, folding her shawl tight.

Rafiq leaned over his bowl. “How long before Company caravans send riders after us?”

Akbar didn’t answer. He stared into the flame a long time, then spoke low.

“Let them ride. We’ll be gone before their boots touch the dust.”

But inside, he knew—this was a new kind of war.

The fire burned low beneath the overhang, casting long shadows against the walls of the shallow cave. They had returned from a second caravan hit — smaller this time, carrying mostly salt blocks and muslin, but the fight had been harder. Two men from the caravan were killed, and Rafiq had taken a shot clean through the shoulder. They patched him up with torn cloth and ash, and he now lay groaning against the wall.

The others ate in silence, passing dry bread between them, the mood colder than the wind crawling in through the cracks. Spin Ghar sat apart from the group, staring into the coals with his arms crossed tight, his jaw locked. Akbar noticed the look, but said nothing. Not at first.

When the last crumbs were eaten and Baaz began cleaning his blade with oil, Spin Ghar finally spoke.

“This can’t continue.”

Heads turned. The fire crackled.

Akbar met his gaze. “What can’t?”

“This,” Ghar said, rising to his feet, motioning toward the sacks they’d carried in, “these raids. These dead men. The path we’re walking. It ends in a ditch. You know it.”

“We’re surviving,” Akbar said flatly.

“No. We’re provoking every tribe, every trade family, every caravan from here to Kabul. The Company hears these stories. The Company doesn’t forget. You want to die under their boots?”

“We don’t speak of dying here,” Akbar replied, voice cool. “We speak of silver. Of food. Of keeping our heads above the mud.”

Ghar took a step forward. “Then let me speak plain. I say we stop now. We vanish. What we’ve taken is enough. We split and run west, or go back to the hills. Live as herders, not jackals.”

Baaz looked between them, uneasy. “We’ve done well. But maybe Ghar’s right. The weight is growing.”

Akbar stood now. Slowly. Deliberate.

“Who leads this crew?” he asked, voice calm.

“I do,” Spin Ghar snapped. “I brought the map. I chose the trails. I brought the men.”

“No,” Akbar said. “I gave ideas. But every man here drew blood. You speak of leading, but none here follow blind.”

“I’m not asking,” Ghar growled. “I say we stop. I say we go home.”

“You say much,” Akbar replied, stepping closer. “But none here wear crowns. You want men to follow? Then hold the blade steadier.”

Ghar’s face twisted. “You’re forgetting your place.”

“No,” Akbar said. “I’m the only one who remembers it.”

In a flash, Spin Ghar’s hand went to his knife. It came free with a rasp, and he lunged—fast for his size, aimed low and fast. But Akbar had seen too many flinches not to know when a man’s patience breaks.

He stepped aside, caught Ghar’s wrist with one hand, turned, and drove his own knife into the side of Ghar’s belly. Not deep at first—just enough to slow him. Then again, higher, under the ribs, straight to the lung.

Ghar staggered, choking, dropping the knife. He clutched Akbar’s coat for a moment, as if to say something—but blood filled his mouth and he sank, coughing, into the dust.

Baaz stood. “Akbar…”

One of the new men—Salim—stepped forward, face tight. “He was our guide. Without him —”

“Without him,” Akbar said, turning, “you’re not bleeding in a ditch outside Kohat. Without him, you're not starving behind dry walls while Company guards whip your backs. Without him, you're alive now. Eating now. With silver in your hands.”

“Still,” Aslam muttered, one eye glaring, “you killed him.”

“I did,” Akbar said, stepping over the body. “Because he raised a blade against his own. We are not sheep. If any man here thinks Ghar’s words were worth his blood, then speak now. Raise steel. Decide.”

No one moved.

Only the fire popped.

Akbar’s voice lowered.

“This crew is no tribe. There’s no council. Here, strength leads. That’s what keeps your stomachs full.”

He wiped his knife clean on Ghar’s tunic, then sat by the fire.

One by one, the men sat with him.

Anara didn't speak. She watched from the shadows, her face unreadable, then turned and walked to the far edge of the cave.

The firelight flickered over Ghar's still body. No one moved it. Not that night.

Now the crew had no more arguments. Only orders.

Akbar was leader.

They followed the river trails eastward, where pine turned to dust and the hills sank into the wide-armed valleys that spilled toward Kabul. The mountains behind them stood high and quiet, holding their dead, holding their silver, holding the names they had earned in blood. Ahead, the land widened. New faces, new dialects. More trade. More risk. They crossed through a dry village near Panjao, buying fodder and bread without speaking more than needed. Men stared but didn't ask. The crew rode tight, heads down, rifles wrapped in cloth but always within reach.

Two days later, just past a gorge where the wind smelled of stone and horse sweat, five riders came down from a rise ahead. They moved slow, deliberate. Their horses wore fine saddles with embroidered blankets. The man at the front had a white beard bound with a copper ring, and his turban was wide and heavy, ornamented with jade. He raised a hand and halted his mount just ahead of the trail.

"Men from the south," he said. "I've heard of you."

Akbar reined his horse in and said nothing. Behind him, Baaz and Yahya drew closer. Tahir spit into the dust.

The old man dismounted, wincing slightly as he stepped down, knees stiff with age. He walked forward slowly, his four men remaining mounted just behind—brothers or nephews, all with long rifles and quiet eyes.

"I am Ghazi Khan of Gujrat," he said. "Leader of these valleys, protector of the trade roads. What you've done—robbery, bloodletting, Company ambushes—it's come to my ears."

Still, Akbar said nothing. He watched the man's feet, his hands, his belt.

"I should hang you," Ghazi Khan continued, trying to stand taller. "But I'm a patient man. I understand hunger. I understand ambition."

He smiled with lips that looked like dried fruit.

"If you wish to ride in my lands, you do so with my blessing. But blessings cost something."

Akbar's voice was low, even.

"What do you want?"

“Eighty,” the old man said. “Eighty percent of every coin you take. Every brick you sell. That’s what it costs to ride under my silence.”

Baaz laughed once. “Eighty?”

The old man ignored him. “You’re not from here. This land does not forgive thieves unless they pay for the forgiveness. You pay or you hang.”

Akbar looked at the man’s face — lined like riverbeds in drought, his skin stretched over bone, the silver in his beard trying to pass for strength. His eyes were sharp, but his breath came short, and the belt around his waist shook with each step. His hands were bare.

Akbar stepped down.

“Let me see you,” he said.

The old man blinked, confused. “See what?”

“Your eyes.”

He took a step forward.

Then, without pause, Akbar pulled his knife and drove it deep into the man’s belly. The blade sank just under the ribs, tearing through flesh, and he twisted hard before yanking it back. The old man’s mouth opened like he meant to say something—but no words came. Only a wet sound, and then a drop.

He fell forward, knees hitting the dust with a dull thud.

“Ambition costs something too,” Akbar muttered.

The four riders behind him reached for their weapons—but the shots came first.

Yahya fired clean into the first rider’s chest, knocking him from his horse. Baaz’s flintlock flared, smoke rushing into the air as another man fell sideways, his leg caught in the stirrup. Tahir and Rafiq opened fire from either side. The remaining two tried to flee, but one was struck in the back as he spurred his mount, tumbling into a thornbush. The last man vanished behind a rise, wounded or running.

It had all taken no more than ten seconds.

Akbar wiped his blade on the old man’s robe, then turned to the others.

“No monarch here,” he said. “No tribes to kneel before.”

Baaz chuckled, wiping powder from his face. “Eighty percent. I’d have taken his ears for saying it.”

Rafiq leaned on his rifle, still watching the trail. “That one who ran—he’ll talk.”

“Let him,” Akbar said. “Let them all talk. By the time they believe the stories, we’ll already be gone.”

They left the bodies where they lay, carrion for birds and memory. Then mounted, turned east, and rode toward Kabul.

Kabul

The towers of Kabul rose slow and pale beyond the dust. It was not yet midday when Akbar and his crew reached the western edge, the sun burning low through a haze that hung over the city like an old cloth. Domes shimmered, minarets reached above rooftops, and from within the walls came the distant clang of hammers, the call of hawkers, and the bleating of animals bound for slaughter. The city was alive, swollen with trade and tired men.

Baaz, Yahya, Rafiq, and the others peeled off down a side street toward the lower quarter where the taverns lay thick, the air ripe with oil and old hashish. Laughter already rolled from narrow alleys.

“We’ll see what the wine tastes like in Kabul,” Baaz called to Akbar over his shoulder, grinning. “And whether the dice fall easier here.”

Akbar only nodded and turned his horse east, Anara riding behind him. The crowd thinned as they passed into the merchant district, where stone houses stood quiet behind latticed wooden doors. Children ran barefoot in the dust. A butcher's goat bleated once before the knife fell.

They came to a courtyard where a tall house stood behind a faded green gate. An old man sat on a stool beneath a mulberry tree, sharpening a blade slowly across a whetstone. He looked up, squinting, as they approached.

"You're the landlord?" Akbar asked.

The man nodded, wiping his hands on his tunic. "How much space you looking for?"

"A home," Akbar said. "For my sister. Stone walls. Quiet. Nothing grand."

The old man stood, motioned them through the gate, and led them to a small but clean house at the edge of the courtyard. It had two rooms, thick doors, a window with wood shutters, and a flat roof shaded by woven reeds. Vines grew in the cracks of the wall. The smell of dust and old bread still clung to the corners, but the bones of the place were solid.

"She can walk to the market in five minutes," the man said. "The hammam is two streets east. No beggars near here. Forty-five silver coins."

Akbar pulled the cloth pouch from beneath his belt, opened it, and let the coins drop one by one into the man's palm.

"She moves in now," Akbar said.

The man nodded, pleased, and shuffled off toward the gate.

Anara stepped through the doorway, eyes scanning the room in silence.

Akbar followed her inside. "This is yours now," he said. "You're free here. You eat well, buy yourself clothes. No more sleeping beside rifles."

She turned, face lit by quiet wonder. "Thank you."

"But listen," Akbar said, voice firm. "No wandering at night. Stay inside when the call for prayer finishes. And be home each day by afternoon. If I come by, I want to find you."

Anara nodded. "I will."

"Go now," he said. "See the market. Eat dates. Buy something fine. I'll return in a few days."

She smiled, wrapped her shawl tighter, and walked out into the street, feet light, vanishing into the crowd without fear.

Akbar watched the empty doorway for a long moment. Then he turned and walked toward the taverns.

By the time he reached the lower quarter, the smell of roasted meat, tobacco smoke, and wine already thickened the alleys. Inside a low stone building, Baaz sat cross-legged at a table, a pipe of raw opium already burning between his fingers. Rafiq leaned against the wall laughing, dice clacking on the table.

“There he is!” Baaz called out, waving. “Did she like the palace?”

Akbar sat down, took the pipe without a word, and pulled a deep drag. The smoke burned into his chest, warm and bitter. He exhaled slow, eyes narrowing as the heat crept into his limbs.

“She’s settled,” he said. “A roof, a market, and no goats to milk.”

Yahya poured a cup and slid it toward him. “May Allah bless your generosity.”

Akbar shrugged. “She’s stronger than most of us. She earned it.”

They played dice till the sun dropped below the rooftops and the room filled with shadow. Baaz rolled three stones across the floor and cursed when two landed on ones. Akbar laughed, smoke still curling from his lips.

Rafiq leaned over the table. “There’s a route north of the city. Caravans come every ten days. Sacks of opium, copper tools, even French rifles sometimes.”

Baaz raised an eyebrow. “Still thinking of work? I just started to forget I had a knife.”

Akbar nodded slowly. “We’ll watch them. When the time’s right, we’ll strike.”

“For now?” Baaz asked.

“For now,” Akbar said, smiling faintly, “we drink what others paid for.”

The laughter filled the room again, rich and careless—for once.

But outside the tavern, in the alleys where smoke never cleared, news of their names already passed from lips to lips, from silver tongues to silent knives.

The next morning in Kabul broke with mist hanging low over the rooftops, curling like breath around the stone minarets and clay domes. Muffled shouts came from the marketplace—vendors calling prices, donkeys braying, and boys arguing over spilled lentils near the mosque gate. The air was cool, but smelled of tandoor ash and old blood, as if the city had never stopped simmering through the night.

Anara stepped out of her house carrying a basket. She moved slowly, not from fear but from watching. Everything here was wider than her old village, faster, louder. In the hills, the wind spoke of wolves and storms. Here, it spoke of coins and eyes and too many doors.

She passed stalls of embroidered cloth, sheep hides, sugar dates stacked in yellow pyramids, and long ropes of onions. At a spice tent, a man tried to press a small jar into her hand, murmuring something about cardamom and saffron. She smiled, waved him off, and moved on.

She bought figs, bread wrapped in newspaper, and a scarf of dyed indigo with stitched vines curling at the edge. A little girl ran past her barefoot, chased by two others with sticks and laughing. Anara paused, watched them disappear around the corner, and for a moment—just a moment—felt something soft settle behind her ribs.

But as she turned to leave the square, her eyes caught something strange. A man across the way, seated beneath a cloth awning beside a birdcage, watching her too long. His beard was trimmed but not local. His coat foreign. His hands folded neatly, fingers that hadn't worked a field in their life. And when he noticed her glance, he smiled—not kindly, not cruelly, but like someone who already knew her name.

Anara turned quickly and walked down another alley.

Elsewhere in the city, Akbar sat alone at a small tea stall, shaded by wooden beams lashed with rope. Baaz had vanished before dawn with Yahya to chase down a rumor about Company traders selling muskets to hill tribes. Akbar hadn't gone. He sipped tea slowly, listening to the quiet ripple of talk around him.

Behind him, two men spoke Farsi, then shifted to Pashto. One mentioned a man stabbed near the eastern gate. Another muttered something about a shipment of rifles intercepted on the Jalalabad road. Akbar kept listening, chewing a stick of clove between his teeth.

The quiet didn't last.

From the side street came boots—too many, too heavy. Four men in Company coats passed, guiding two chained prisoners between them. One was local, skin burnt from sun and work. The other was not. Pale hands, dirty clothes that once had fine stitching. A European, maybe a deserter, maybe a thief who thought he could vanish into the hills.

Akbar watched them go, eyes narrowing slightly. Kabul had grown tense since they arrived. Soldiers patrolled more. Traders whispered of bribes and vanishing cousins.

Later, as the sun dropped and the wind shifted, Akbar returned to the house.

Anara was already back, sitting in the small courtyard, her hands quiet in her lap.

He looked at her. "Something wrong?"

She shook her head once. “Nothing. But someone saw me today.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“Describe him.”

She did.

Akbar stood still a moment, the evening breeze fluttering the loose cloth on the window frame. Then he walked to the corner, lifted the floorboard, checked the coins. Still there.

He didn’t speak for a while.

That night he returned to the tavern, but the smoke didn’t settle in him the same. He drank little. Played no dice.

The wind outside the city carried messages again.

He told Baaz. Quietly. Over a game of dice where no one cared for the outcome.

“You sure he was watching her?” Baaz asked, rolling the stones without looking.

“She’s not a fool,” Akbar replied.

Baaz nodded once. “Then we find out who he is.”

For two days they watched. Not openly. Not like dogs waiting in the street. They sat in cafés that smelled of old tea and spilled rosewater. They wandered near the market with baskets they didn’t need. Baaz posed as a trader looking for cloves. Akbar helped a boy sell boiled eggs near the birdcage stalls.

Then on the third day, he saw him.

The same man. Same coat. This time standing in a group—four others beside him, all foreign. Not British uniforms, but dressed close enough to blend. One of them spoke with a slight Persian drawl. One had an English face, pale as chalk under his headscarf. They passed a pouch between them, nodded to a merchant, and walked off behind a tannery.

Akbar followed, two streets behind.

He didn’t draw a weapon. Just walked, hands loose, steps silent.

The group turned behind a slaughterhouse, then vanished through a rusted gate.

That night, Akbar returned to the house and found Anara reading from a worn book by the window. She looked up once, but said nothing.

He leaned against the doorframe and spoke low.

“If he speaks to you, don’t answer. If he touches you, stab him. Don’t wait.”

She nodded once.

“I’ve seen them. Five men. Two are English. One’s local. I don’t know yet if they’re Company or something worse.”

“What would be worse?” she asked quietly.

Akbar didn’t answer.

Elsewhere in the city, Baaz was gambling in a darker quarter, where the ceilings were low and the lanterns swung by chains. He drank sparingly now, but his mouth worked faster. He made friends quickly. Not close ones, but useful ones.

That night, he sat beside a man with cracked teeth and a burned ear. The man had fought in Punjab and once smuggled silver bars to Kandahar.

“You heard of a group working the east market?” Baaz asked him.

“Which group?”

“Foreigners. Traders without shops. Always watching.”

The man spat into a bucket. “One of them came to me once. Wanted to buy snake venom. Said he needed it for 'hunting'.” He laughed. “Didn't ask what kind of game bleeds from the mouth.”

Baaz leaned closer. “What else?”

“They don’t sleep in the city. They ride out at night. I think they’re waiting.”

“For what?”

“I didn’t ask.”

By the fourth day, Akbar gathered the crew again in a quiet room above a closed tailor’s shop. The shutters were drawn. The room smelled of wool and dust and pipe ash.

“They’re not merchants,” he said. “They’re watching someone. Maybe us. Maybe something else.”

Rafiq leaned against the wall. “You want to kill them?”

“Not yet.”

“What then?”

Akbar looked around at the circle of faces—weathered, scarred, half-broken, but loyal.

“We find out who they are. What they want. If they’re here for us, we cut them. If they’re not, we let them pass.”

Baaz scratched his beard. “And if they’re Company?”

Akbar’s voice was low. “Then we start a fire big enough that they forget why they came.”

No one laughed this time.

Meanwhile, Anara had returned to the market. The man was not there anymore. She walked the same paths, lingered at the same stalls. Once she passed the cage of nightingales and paused. The old man selling them looked at her.

“You like birds?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “But I know what cages look like.”

He nodded, as if he understood, and said no more.

A different game had begun now. The knives were still sharp, the rifles still loaded. But the next wound might not come from a blade—it might come from a word spoken in the wrong corner.

Two nights later, under a sky so cloudless it rang with silence, Akbar stood on the rooftop of Anara’s house, watching Kabul stretch beneath him like a folded map. Torches flickered far below where the guards circled the city gate. Somewhere to the north, faint voices drifted from a caravan resting at the river’s edge. The city never truly slept, only changed its tone—noisy barter became whispered meetings, shouting crowds became footsteps that didn’t want to be heard.

Baaz climbed up from the inner courtyard. He had wine on his breath, not enough to stagger but enough to loosen what he'd been holding in.

“They're not Company men,” he said, leaning his elbows on the wall beside Akbar. “But they’re not alone either.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re scouts. Quiet ones. I followed one this morning. He went to the big house on the hill above the blue mosque.”

Akbar frowned. “The one with the Indian flags?”

Baaz nodded. “They call it the Grey House. The locals say it belonged to some Mughal nobleman, but now the doors stay locked and the staff don’t talk.”

Akbar said nothing, just breathed slowly through his nose.

“And here’s the part that twists the gut,” Baaz went on. “There’s someone else behind it. Not British, not Company. A man named Murad Shah. From Kandahar originally. Smuggler, some say. Arms dealer, others say worse. Pays soldiers to wear no uniform. Pays merchants not to speak his name. And now—he’s in Kabul.”

Akbar turned. “And what does he want with us?”

“That,” Baaz said, “I haven’t learned yet. But he’s watching.”

Akbar’s gaze dropped to the darkened streets. A dog barked once in the distance, then went silent.

In the market the next morning, Anara returned to the bird cage stall. The old man nodded at her. He handed her a small cloth bundle, no words, just the softest gesture of his palm.

She unwrapped it under the shade of a wooden awning.

Inside: a note, written in old Persian script, barely legible.

"They will take what you love before they ask what you owe."

She folded it back and burned it in the nearest oil lamp.

By noon, Akbar summoned the crew again—this time not in the tavern, but at a ruined madrasa north of the city. Only a few arches still stood. Dust filled the prayer hall. Baaz, Yahya, Rafiq, Tahir, Salim, and Anara sat on woven rugs torn at the edges.

“We may have enemies we can’t shoot,” Akbar said.

Salim, quiet as always, rubbed the side of his dagger. “Then what do we do?”

“We find Murad Shah,” Akbar said. “We learn what he’s doing here. Who he serves. And if he means to strike—”

“We strike first,” Rafiq finished.

Yahya looked toward Anara. “She should leave the city.”

“I’m not leaving,” she said. Her voice was soft, but unshaking.

Akbar glanced at her. “Then stay near the house. Nothing else. You hear?”

She nodded once.

That night, Baaz found one of the Grey House guards drunk outside a teahouse, mouth too loose and purse too heavy. He followed him down a narrow alley and asked three questions before the blade met the man's side. The answers were enough.

Murad Shah was gathering buyers.

Not for cloth. Not for opium.

For men.

He was hiring blades across Kabul—assassins, cutthroats, smugglers, the scattered remnants of failed tribes, exiled sons, men with wounds in their names and nothing left to sell but loyalty. He paid in salt bars and raw coin. His target wasn't just trade.

He was building something.

And Akbar's crew—loud, infamous, brutal—were the dust he needed cleared before it settled.

"He's going to try to kill us," Baaz said plainly when he returned.

Akbar looked across the city from the rooftop once more.

"No," he said. "He's going to try to buy us first."

Three days later, an invitation arrived.

It wasn't handed to Akbar directly, nor to Baaz, nor to any of the men who walked with knives under their shirts. It was given to Anara, folded inside a basket of fresh dates delivered to her door by a silent boy with henna-stained hands. No name. No words. Only the basket and a nod.

Anara opened it after sundown. Inside, among the dates, lay a square of ivory paper, scented faintly with clove and rose oil, folded clean and sealed with a grey wax mark—three crescents beneath a single crown.

She didn't read it at first. She just sat there in the courtyard, the torchlight soft on her face. Then she opened it.

"Your name has weight. I offer you the chance to place it where it will not be crushed. Come to the Grey House tomorrow at sunset. Bring no swords unless you intend to lose them."

She brought it to Akbar without a word.

He read it once, then again. The fire crackled low in the brazier. No one else spoke. Baaz watched with eyes half-lidded, as if already seeing the roads this letter might open.

"Well," Baaz finally said, "he's polite."

Akbar folded the paper and slipped it into his coat. “He wants us close before he decides whether to kill us or feed us.”

“And you’ll go?” Anara asked.

Akbar nodded.

“Alone?” Baaz asked.

“Yes.”

“You think that’s wise?”

“No.”

Baaz smirked. “Then I’ll be nearby. On a rooftop. With a good rifle and bad intentions.”

The next day passed like wool through water—slow, soaked in quiet. Akbar said little, ate little, and when the hour came, he left the house on foot, unarmed, wearing a clean black robe and a leather belt with no blade. He walked alone through Kabul’s lower streets, past donkeys nosing through refuse, past women buying lentils from a cart, past three barefoot children drawing shapes in the dust.

The Grey House stood on the northern rise above the blue mosque, a tall structure of worn marble and deep arches. Its doors opened before he reached them. Two guards stood at either side. Neither spoke. One nodded, then stepped aside.

Akbar entered.

The air inside was scented with crushed orange peel and something darker, musk or ink or something he didn’t recognize. Rugs covered the stone. A silver tray of dates sat untouched on a table. Behind it stood a man—not tall, but straight-backed, clean-shaven, his coat dark green with thin silver piping. His eyes were sharp and unhurried. He did not offer his name.

“You’ve built a name from pieces,” the man said. “Most men only carry one story behind them. You carry ten. Each louder than the last.”

Akbar didn’t sit. “You sent for me. Speak.”

“You’re dangerous. But not reckless. That’s rare.” The man took a date and bit it slowly. “You kill only when the blade must fall. You rob caravans, but not for joy. You build, even while burning.”

Akbar said nothing.

“I am not the Company,” the man continued. “I am not your enemy. Unless you make me one.”

“Then what are you?”

“I am what fills the space after kings fall and foreigners lose interest. I am what this land becomes when everyone else leaves their bones behind and forgets they ever drew maps here.”

Akbar stepped closer. “Say what you want.”

The man smiled faintly. “I want you to work for me.”

Akbar’s face did not change.

“As an ally. A tool. A sword I do not have to fear behind my back.” He leaned forward. “There will be war. In five months, or five years—it does not matter. The British tighten their grip. The Sikhs rise again. Herat plots. Every man with a field will need to choose who shields it. You can stand outside the storm and wait for the wind to carry you off. Or you can put your name in stone.”

“I’ve already chosen where I stand.”

“Have you?” the man asked. “Do your men agree? Baaz? Rafiq? Even your sister? How long before they begin choosing for you?”

Akbar’s mouth tightened.

“I’m not your enemy,” the man repeated. “But if you walk out that door and choose to make me one, the grey houses won’t open again.”

Silence stretched.

Then Akbar said, “You speak too well for a man who hasn’t killed something he loved.”

And he turned, and walked out.

Outside, Baaz stood on a distant rooftop, his rifle resting across his knees. He watched Akbar exit the gate and walk into the dusk, slow and steady.

From above, Kabul glowed faint under the rising moon.

And in the courtyards of the Grey House, the scent of orange peel began to fade.

The next morning came with a chill wind scraping down from the mountains. Kabul’s skies had turned grey, low clouds rolling over the ridges like warning smoke. Akbar sat outside the house, sharpening his knife on a whetstone, his coat folded beside him, shirt damp with last night’s sweat. Anara watched him from the doorway but didn’t speak. She had seen that look before—in their father’s eyes when he knew wolves were near, when something beyond the hills had started to move.

Baaz arrived just before midday, carrying dried meat and bread in a cloth bundle. He tossed it down and sat cross-legged in the dust.

“What did he say?” he asked.

Akbar didn’t stop sharpening. “He wants to buy us.”

“Of course he does.”

“He made a speech. Said the land is shifting. Said men like us have to pick a side or get buried.”

Baaz ripped a piece of bread. “And you said no.”

“I said he speaks too well.”

Baaz smirked. “Then I’m guessing we’ll be getting visitors soon.”

Akbar wiped the blade, turned it in his hand. “Not tonight. But soon.”

By evening, the crew gathered in the stone-walled room above the closed tailor’s shop. Baaz, Rafiq, Yahya, Salim, Tahir—all present. Anara sat quietly in the corner, listening without drawing breath.

“They’re building something,” Akbar said. “Murad Shah and his men. Not just trade routes or safe houses. They want to pull the city in like a rope around the throat.”

“He’s got money,” Rafiq said. “Soldiers. Quiet ones. The kind who’ve done worse things than we have.”

Yahya leaned back against the wall, eyes half-closed. “So we strike now?”

“No,” Akbar said. “He hasn’t moved yet. Not openly. If we cut him now, we start a war on his terms.”

Tahir spat onto the rug. “If he comes at us with men, I’ll cut his name from his tongue.”

Baaz passed a pipe to Yahya and lit it with a small coal.

“We hold,” Akbar said. “But we watch. We ask in the streets. Every shadow that moves near the house, we follow. I want to know who’s whispering to him. I want to know if he’s reaching for the Company.”

Baaz raised an eyebrow. “And if he is?”

Akbar looked across the room. “Then Kabul is no longer big enough for both of us.”

Meanwhile, in the western end of the city, a boy no older than ten entered the Grey House with a bundle of figs and left with a silver coin and a message: “They didn’t kneel.”

Murad Shah read it by lamplight. His hands were gloved, even indoors. He said nothing, but the man beside him—an older Kandahari with one blind eye—watched his silence carefully.

“Do we move on them?” the one-eyed man asked.

Murad Shah set the note down, tapped the table with his fingers, and said, “Not yet. There’s a girl among them.”

The following days passed in tension that never quite cracked. Anara stayed indoors mostly, except for two market trips where Baaz followed at a distance. She said nothing more of the man with the beard. But her eyes were sharper now, and her scarf always tighter across her face.

Rafiq returned one evening with news.

“I spoke to a man who works the old Herat road. Said Shah’s men are arming a caravan—fifteen riders, three wagons. They leave in two nights. Headed east.”

“What’s in the wagons?” Akbar asked.

“He didn’t know. But he said the riders weren’t local. Two spoke Russian. One had a tattoo of a tiger on his neck.”

The room fell quiet.

Baaz exhaled slowly through his nose. “Foreign arms. New blood. What’s he building?”

Akbar looked around the room.

“We’re going to find out.”

The moon rose fat and yellow over the black hills east of Kabul. On the ridge above the old Herat road, Akbar and Baaz lay prone behind a line of rocks, cloaked in dust, their rifles wrapped in cloth. Below them, two fires flickered beside three wagons, and the shadows of fifteen men moved with slow discipline—too slow and too quiet for Afghan tribesmen. These weren’t the wild sort that cracked jokes and passed wine before sleep. These were trained men, foreign in movement even if wrapped in native garb.

Baaz whispered, “See the second wagon? Locked chest under canvas. That’s no wool shipment.”

Akbar nodded. “And the third wagon—the driver’s missing two fingers. Saw him once in Kandahar, years ago. Russian mercenary.”

Baaz chuckled softly. “You remember missing fingers. I remember noses.”

Akbar adjusted the sight on his rifle. “Two shots. Then down the slope.”

Baaz pulled his own rifle tight to his shoulder. “What if it's a trap?”

“It is,” Akbar said. “But we spring it first.”

They waited until the fires burned low and the guards began to drift in their patrol, one of them squatting to shit in the dark. Then two shots cracked at once—one struck a man beside the fire, the other took down the sentry near the second wagon.

Chaos exploded.

Men yelled, rifles barked, smoke drifted in slow sheets over the camp. By the time Akbar and Baaz reached the base of the slope, Yahya, Salim, and Rafiq had already come from the other side, blades drawn, cutting through the tent line like hawks. A rider tried to mount and was dragged down by Tahir, who stabbed upward beneath the man's ribs, letting the blood spill over his hands without slowing.

A grenade went off near the third wagon, sending the canvas burning and the driver’s corpse flying backwards. Akbar rushed to the second wagon, tore the lock from the chest with the butt of his rifle.

Inside—sealed tins, carefully wrapped.

Opium, yes.

But also rifles.

New ones.

Polished, with ironwork unfamiliar. Not British. Not Russian. French or something else. Too fine to have come through the usual smugglers.

He grabbed one and turned to find Baaz kicking a wounded man onto his back.

The man coughed, lips red. One eye swollen shut. Still alive.

Akbar knelt beside him.

“Who are you carrying for?”

The man said nothing.

Baaz stepped on his hand. Hard.

Still nothing.

Then Akbar leaned in close. “You’re not from here. You smell like paper and steel. But you’re not stupid. Say something or you die without a name.”

The man muttered something in broken Persian. One word caught in the dust between his teeth.

“Marjah…”

Baaz frowned. “Marjah? That’s Helmand. Far south.”

Akbar stood. “Murad Shah’s reach is wider than we thought.”

Baaz looked at the tin Akbar held. “We can’t carry all of it.”

“No,” Akbar said. “Burn the wagons. Take what we can. Leave the bodies for vultures.”

The next morning, Anara was waiting by the house’s gate. Her scarf was soaked with dew. She looked at Akbar’s coat, bloodied along the hem.

“You found them.”

He nodded.

“Was it him?”

Akbar looked past her, toward the rooftops and the grey morning mist.

“It was the start of something.”

That evening, Baaz brought word.

“A rider from Shah’s circle was killed last night. Poisoned in a teahouse. No one knows who did it. But rumor says it was one of ours.”

Akbar shook his head. “We don’t use poison.”

Baaz shrugged. “Maybe someone wants us to look like we do.”

In the Grey House, Murad Shah stood at the upper window, looking down at the city where fires burned in iron pots and children ran barefoot through alleys. A letter sat on the table behind him, unopened. His man with the blind eye stood in silence beside the wall.

“They’ve struck,” Shah said.

“Yes,” the man replied.

“Harder than expected.”

“Yes.”

“And yet they refuse to be bought.”

“Yes.”

Murad Shah turned slowly. “Then we will take what they will not sell.”

Kabul’s markets changed with the air. In summer the breeze came down hot from the cliffs and carried the scent of fruit and sweat. But now, as autumn crept into the city, it brought something colder—voices lowered in corners, soldiers posted near wells, coins exchanged more silently than before. The city was preparing itself the way men do before a funeral: everyone knew something was near, but no one dared say whose body would be carried first.

Anara walked through the city not like a ghost, but like someone the wind itself avoided. She kept her shawl tight, her steps unhurried. She passed the bird-seller’s stall, now shuttered. She passed the mosque gate where beggars once sat, now cleared by men with swords. She paused only at the apothecary—an old woman with cracked hands and jars that smelled of vinegar and time.

The old woman glanced at her, then reached below the counter and placed a pouch on the stone.

“No charge,” she said, voice like sand. “The man who paid said the lady in the blue scarf would come.”

Anara picked it up. The powder inside smelled of dried roots and metal. “What is it?”

“A cure, if you know how to use it. A curse, if you don’t.”

“Who paid?”

“He didn’t say his name. But he asked if your brother was still breathing.”

Anara held her eyes a moment, then walked away.

In the hills above Kabul, where the grass gave way to dirt and bare rock, Akbar stood with Baaz beside an old watchtower, half-collapsed. They were watching smoke.

Baaz spat into the dust. “Murad Shah’s burning fields now. Not just ours. Anyone’s who’s taken our coin. He’s declaring it.”

Akbar didn’t move.

“We can’t fight him by fire alone,” Baaz said.

Akbar still said nothing.

Baaz turned to him. “You know what this is. You know what he’s doing.”

“Yes,” Akbar said. “He’s making us villains in our own land.”

Baaz waited. Then he said, “Rafiq’s gone.”

Akbar looked at him finally. “Gone where?”

Baaz shook his head. “No word. He left two nights ago. Took his rifle. Left his coat.”

“He’s not the first.”

“No. But if he speaks…”

“He won’t.”

“You trust him?”

“I trust his silence more than his loyalty.”

That night the crew gathered in the cave beyond the old southern road. Anara came too. They sat around the fire while the wind howled against the stones outside.

Tahir was sharpening a blade. Yahya was smoking from a narrow pipe, eyes unfocused.

Akbar looked at them.

“Murad Shah has started a war,” he said. “He sends poison to our markets, fire to our friends. He spreads stories that we slit throats in the dark and leave women without coin. He thinks if we are feared, we will be hunted.”

“Are we not feared already?” Tahir asked.

“Not enough,” Baaz answered. “Or else he wouldn’t need stories.”

Akbar pulled out a map. The edges were torn, the rivers faded. He pointed to a road near Bamyan.

“He sends caravans here now. Around us. Avoiding Kabul altogether. If we strike there, we pull his hand back. If we don’t—he closes the loop.”

Salim asked quietly, “And if we lose?”

Akbar looked up.

“Then he wins everything.”

Meanwhile, in Kabul, the man with the trimmed beard stood again in the market, this time not watching Anara, but the faces of boys buying sweets with stolen coins. He saw her only once—passing between two stalls, eyes hard.

He did not smile.

Later that day, a note was left at her doorstep. No scent, no wax seal. Just a name: *Marjah*. And a date. Seven days from now.

That night, Anara didn't speak of it to Akbar. But she folded the note and placed it inside her coat.

She would go.

The caravan road to Bamyan ran like a wound through the belly of the land—thin, twisting, always at the mercy of rockfalls and men with guns. The pass near Deh Baba had seen three robberies in the past month, two of them the work of Shah's men, disguised as nomads. Now Akbar planned to make it a fourth, but not for gold, not even for opium. What he wanted was proof.

He rode with Baaz, Yahya, and Salim—Tahir stayed behind to guard the house, and Anara was nowhere to be seen when they departed. Baaz had noticed her packing food into a cloth satchel the night before, eyes drawn and still. He said nothing to Akbar then, but it sat in him like a stone.

They rode light—no wagons, no heavy gear. Flintlocks, two rifles, curved blades in the saddle wraps. They reached the narrow bend of the pass by dusk and waited behind a slanted rock face that had once been a lookout post during some forgotten skirmish. The cold bit deeper here. The fire they lit was smokeless, the food hard and dry.

Baaz leaned back and looked up at the stars. "I have a bad thought."

Akbar kept cleaning his rifle. "Then spit it out."

"If Shah is moving arms, foreign arms, he's not doing it for himself."

Akbar's eyes lifted slowly. "You think the British?"

Baaz shook his head. "No. Not their style. The British don't share knives. They buy theirs already clean. This is someone else."

Akbar looked down into the valley. "Then let's find the letter in the pocket before the body turns cold."

The next morning, they heard the bells.

Goat bells at first, then iron wheels over rock. A slow-moving caravan, two wagons, six horses, maybe ten guards. Too small for Shah's usual shows of force. That meant something precious or secret.

They waited until the last wagon passed the notch, then struck.

Baaz fired first, his bullet splitting a man's shoulder and dropping him sideways. Yahya took down the rear guard. Salim was on the slope, slinging rocks to panic the horses. Akbar leapt from the rock face, landed in dust, and was among them before they knew he was real.

It was over fast. One guard tried to run, Baaz shot him in the leg. Another knelt and cried something in Dari, but Salim silenced him with a blow to the temple.

Akbar ripped open the rear wagon.

Inside were barrels marked with a strange crest—three lions twisted around a sword. Not Company. Not Russian. Letters written in French.

He opened one barrel and stared.

Rifles, short-barreled, polished, finer than anything they'd seen. And a black ledger wrapped in waxed cloth.

He tossed it to Baaz.

Baaz flipped through, frowned. “This isn’t Shah’s writing.”

“Whose is it?”

Baaz tilted the book toward the light. “It’s from someone named Vernier. Captain Vernier. A French officer. These were supposed to be delivered to a man called Murad Shah—along with maps of trade roads, troop positions in the Khyber, and a note promising future shipments if *‘cooperation remains profitable.’*”

Akbar said nothing for a long time.

Then he looked at Baaz. “So now we know.”

Meanwhile, south of the city, Anara rode alone toward Marjah.

She had borrowed a horse from the stable boy, told no one where she was going. Her shawl was wrapped tight, a dagger hidden under her belt. The note burned faintly against her chest, folded beneath her robe.

The land grew harsher as she rode—flatter, dustier, shadows longer. Villages grew fewer. Farmers watched from behind low walls. She stopped only once to drink and ask directions. A child pointed her toward a low ridge, where tents fluttered near a dried-up riverbed.

There she found them.

Not soldiers. Not traders. Women.

Six of them, faces hidden, seated in a circle. At the center, a tall woman in a dark green shawl rose.

“You came,” she said.

Anara dismounted. “Who are you?”

“We are what remains of what Murad Shah has taken. Sisters. Daughters. Wives.”

“I don’t understand.”

The woman stepped forward. Her voice was calm, but brittle. “He takes women. Not openly. Not violently. But through promises. Through gold. Through silence. And when he tires of them, he sends them to vanish. Some are sold. Some are buried.”

Anara’s hand tightened on her belt. “Why call me?”

“Because your name is known. You walk with men who burn wagons. But you walk alone through markets. He sees that. He wants you next.”

Anara felt the cold slide through her chest like a slow knife.

The woman held out a clay token. It bore the same mark from the letter—three crescents beneath a crown.

“He marks those he wants.”

Anara took it and turned it in her hand. “Then he marked the wrong one.”

Back near the Herat road, Akbar lit the ledger with fire.

Baaz stood beside him, watching the flames rise.

“No more doubt,” Baaz said.

“No,” Akbar replied. “No more.”

He looked west, toward Kabul.

“The next time we ride,” he said, “we ride to end it.”

They rode at night.

Seven men, armed and silent, moved beneath the moonlight through the low hills southeast of Kabul, the white dust of the road clinging to their legs like ghosts that wouldn’t let go. Akbar rode first, his coat flapping behind him, flintlock strapped across his chest, rifle over his back. Beside him, Baaz rode without speaking. Salim, Yahya, and the others followed, heads down, teeth clenched. They knew what they were riding toward now. This was no caravan. No storage house. No scattered depot in the hills. They were riding to the Grey House.

The war had shifted from road to stone.

Akbar had waited long enough.

That morning, word reached the Grey House that the Bamyan shipment had been taken, all men killed or fled. The French ledger never arrived. The Company agents who had been watching from Kabul's eastern wall had gone quiet, and the whisper networks in the lower quarters began to churn with rumors.

Murad Shah stood in the high room again, this time not at the window, but seated at the long table, hands steepled before him.

His advisor, the one-eyed Kandahari, read the names aloud. "Yahya. Salim. Baaz. And Akbar. They've struck six caravans in three months. They've taken enough arms to start a revolt. They've murdered your men in Shawal, Ghazni, and now the Herat line. And now they're headed here."

Murad Shah said nothing.

"You should leave. Or call your French backers. Let them take the blow."

Murad Shah looked at him.

"No," he said. "Let them come. And when they stand before me, we'll see if the stories they tell are taller than the graves they'll dig."

That same night, in Kabul's south quarter, Anara returned.

Her face was drawn, her clothes wind-swept from the ride from Marjah. But her eyes burned steady. She entered the house silently. Akbar was not there. Neither were the men.

She found only Tahir, tending to the weapons, wrapping blades in cloth.

He looked up once. "They left."

"When?"

"Before dawn."

"Where?"

"To finish it."

She said nothing more. Just walked into the main room, unwrapped the clay token from her satchel, and placed it on the table. Then she began packing salt, dried bread, her dagger. She took the small pistol Akbar kept hidden behind the stove. Loaded it. Strapped it to her belt.

Tahir stood watching. "You're not going to stop him?"

"No," she said. "I'm going to be there when it ends."

The ride to the Grey House was long, but not far. They took side roads, old animal paths, and goat tracks that wound behind terraces and dry canals. No lanterns. Just the silver glow of moonlight and memory guiding them forward.

When they reached the slope above the city, Akbar stopped.

Below, Kabul lay dark and coiled like a sleeping animal. The Grey House sat at its edge, lit faintly by four torchposts and guarded by a dozen men. The gate was closed. The courtyard quiet.

Baaz rode up beside him. “You sure?”

Akbar didn’t answer.

Salim pulled his scarf tight. “If he has Frenchmen inside, there may be rifles. Mines. Traps.”

Akbar said, “Then we bleed where it matters.”

They approached on foot, rifles slung low, crouched behind alley walls. Two men were stationed at the north entrance. Baaz took the one on the left with a stone hammer. Akbar slit the other’s throat in silence. The courtyard was empty but for a single boy sleeping near the fountain. They stepped over him and reached the main door.

It was open.

Not wide. But not locked.

Baaz frowned. “He wants us inside.”

Akbar nodded.

“Then let’s step in.”

The interior of the Grey House was silent, too clean, as if it had been scrubbed of blood before the first drop had ever fallen. Akbar led the way through the entry hall. The scent of rose oil lingered in the air. A large rug covered the floor.

As they passed, Akbar stopped.

There was a click.

“Trap,” he whispered—

—but not fast enough.

The charge under the rug exploded, blasting wooden splinters into Yahya’s side, sending Salim flying backward. Smoke filled the chamber. Screaming. Another blast from the side, from a hallway—gunpowder, not dynamite. A trap gun.

Then came the rifles. From the upper balcony, Murad Shah's men opened fire.

Akbar rolled behind a column, rifle out. Baaz dragged Yahya's body out of the smoke—alive, barely, bleeding fast. Akbar fired upward, hitting one man in the shoulder. Another leaned over the railing, shouting orders in a foreign tongue.

They were surrounded.

But they had come for this.

Then Akbar saw Anara crouching outside—eyes wide with disbelief—and then returned to firing.

Baaz rose again, bleeding from the arm, and tossed a bottle of oil onto the rug. Lit it. Flames burst upward, smoke rising. More shots. Screaming.

Then—

A voice. Calm. Rising above it all.

"Enough."

Murad Shah stepped out onto the upper balcony.

Alone.

He held no weapon. Just a letter in one hand. His coat was dark green, unmarked, spotless.

Akbar raised his rifle.

Shah did not flinch.

"You burn," he said. "And for what?"

Akbar said nothing.

Shah looked to Anara. "Even your sister comes to bleed. Do you think your rage is justice?"

Akbar stepped forward. "This isn't rage."

Shah nodded once.

Then Akbar fired.

The bullet struck him between the ribs.

Murad Shah staggered, dropped the paper, and fell.

The house burned behind him.

Later, they stood outside. Salim was dead. Yahya wounded, but breathing. Tahir quiet. Baaz was seated against the wall, cleaning the blood from his hand with rags.

Anara looked at her brother. “Is it finished?”

Akbar looked at the city, at the rising smoke, the silence spreading from the house.

“No,” he said. “But now… it begins again.”

In the weeks that followed, Kabul breathed like a man after a long beating—slow, uncertain, with blood still in the teeth. The Grey House was gone, blackened ruins now picked over by boys and scavenger dogs. The men who had followed Murad Shah either disappeared into silence or reappeared in foreign robes, pledging themselves to new names. The French never came to collect their arms. Their letters stopped. Whatever pact had been struck between them and Murad Shah had died with the man, and no one rose to claim it.

Akbar stayed in the city.

He did not ride.

Not at first.

The men who survived with him—Baaz, Tahir, Yahya—stayed close, meeting in upper rooms of empty shops, in quiet courtyards, always armed, never loud. They were not hiding. But they were waiting. The way a knife waits in a dark pocket.

Anara returned to the house. She did not stay home every day. She began visiting the women from Marjah—now slowly arriving in Kabul. Some carried nothing. Others carried children. They moved like shadows through the city, taking no coin, asking no help. Anara brought them food. A place to sleep.

Baaz came one night with his hand wrapped in cloth. He’d been cut during a scuffle with two men—former Shah mercenaries, now working under a minor tribal khan trying to claim the old house's territory. Baaz sat across from Akbar, silent, chewing a root.

“There’ll be more,” he said finally.

“There always are.”

“You want to deal with them?”

“Not yet.”

Baaz raised an eyebrow. “Waiting for something?”

Akbar nodded toward the far window, where the stars were beginning to disappear behind the morning.

“I’m watching.”

Baaz didn’t ask what.

Two weeks later, word came from Jalalabad—two Company agents had been ambushed on their way to Kabul. One survived, barely, and he spoke of rifles in the hands of villagers, not soldiers. French rifles. Stamped with marks they didn’t recognize.

Akbar folded the message. “They still want a foothold.”

Baaz smirked. “Then let’s sell them the rope to hang themselves with.”

Snow came early that year.

The white covered the blood stains in the alleys. Covered the cracked stone of the Grey House ruins. Covered the caravan tracks that no longer passed through the hills.

Akbar stood one morning with his coat drawn tight, hands on the saddle of a new horse—black, strong, bought with silver.

Akbar passed through the city without being seen. He knew the turns to take, the doors that would not speak his name, the boys who sat near alleys with sticks in hand and said nothing when he walked past.

He had grown into something the city didn’t know how to name—neither outlaw nor nobleman. Just feared.

Baaz walked behind him, limping slightly from an old wound that hadn’t healed right. Tahir waited with the horses near the market gate. Yahya had left days ago to Jalalabad, and they’d heard nothing since. That was worrying. But Akbar didn’t speak it aloud. In their trade, silence was often the only shield left.

They arrived at the mud-walled house near the edge of the northern slope, where the man from Nuristan lived. His name was Said Alam, an old warrior who now wore a merchant’s robe and grew poppy on fields he didn’t own.

Said Alam met them at the gate with a crooked smile.

“You’ve come late. The snow covers half the road to Laghman.”

“We ride slow now,” Baaz muttered.

“You ride lucky,” Alam said. “If I were Murad Shah’s kin, I’d have carved your names into stone by now.”

“Then it’s good he had no sons,” Akbar said, stepping inside.

Inside the house, the walls were bare except for one old jezail rifle hanging above a prayer mat. The tea was hot, sweet with cardamom. They drank quietly.

Said Alam looked at Akbar after the second cup.

“You still stealing from caravans?”

“No.”

“Lying now, are we?”

“We take from men who’ve already taken.”

“That's just stealing with longer sleeves.”

Akbar didn’t argue.

The old man leaned forward. “There’s word from the south. Not Company men. Traders from deeper—Arabs, maybe. Moving through Ghazni. Looking to buy land, rights, influence. One of them asked about you.”

Akbar’s eyes narrowed. “Name?”

“Didn’t give it. But he knew yours. And he had men with him—clean swords, paid hands. Men with maps.”

Baaz leaned back. “And you told him nothing?”

“I’m still alive, aren’t I?”

That night, they returned to the house in Kabul. Anara had swept the floor. Warm bread sat folded in cloth near the corner. She said nothing when they entered. Akbar removed his coat, hung it near the wall, and sat in silence beside the stove. Baaz washed his hands. The wind outside howled.

Later, as Anara brought water, she paused beside Akbar.

“There was a man at the market,” she said, eyes on the floor.

“What kind?”

“He didn’t buy. Just watched. He asked the fruit seller if your sister still lived in this quarter.”

Akbar nodded once.

“Thank you.”

She turned and left. The stove crackled.

Baaz said, “They’re looking again.”

Akbar picked up a knife from the table, testing its weight. “Let them.”

Baaz looked at him. “What now?”

“We find out who these men are. What they want. And if the map they carry has our graves marked already.”

Within two weeks, Akbar had six new men.

They came one by one, not all from Kabul. One was a herder from Kunduz who had cut a Company agent’s throat in a drunken argument over a coin and fled the province with his brother’s rifle. Another came from the hills near Ghor, a sharp-eyed hunter with no family and three tribal deaths hanging behind him. One arrived from Jalalabad without name or tribe—just a worn scabbard, and the mark of a prison rope scar around his neck. The rest were from lesser houses, failed clans, half-exiled sons of once-feared names, willing to trade loyalty for silver and shelter.

Baaz called them dogs. Akbar called them knives.

By the end of the month, their crew numbered thirteen.

Tahir and Baaz remained close, trusted, older. The new men kept near the walls when they met in the courtyard, listening more than speaking, watching Akbar with a blend of respect and calculation. But none challenged him. Not yet. Strength was clear in a man's face, and Akbar’s no longer showed doubt.

He met them all at the courtyard behind the tannery, an open space hidden from the street where the stench of leather masked the scent of gunpowder and sweat. The meeting was short. Akbar stood before them as the snow melted in slow drops from the roofs around.

“You’re not here to guard sheep,” he said. “You’re not here to wave swords in the alleys. You’re here because there’s coin buried in other men’s caravans, and I’ve seen too many ride to it and not return.”

He looked to the man from Ghor. “You—Qadir. You can ride?”

“Like breath.”

“You hunt?”

“I wait longer than men can.”

Akbar nodded. “Good. You’ll ride with me and Baaz first.”

He turned to another—a tall man, long-bearded, dark eyes.

“You. Gul Rahman. You’ve killed?”

“In prison. And after.”

“Will you kill again if needed?”

“If the man deserves it.”

Baaz spat. “Then you’ll be busy.”

Laughter broke the silence briefly.

Akbar cut it off with a raised hand.

“We ride east again. Company stores near Jagdalak. The routes change, but I’ve got word of a mule convoy that leaves within four days. Weapons, cloth, medicines. They’ll be guarded, but not like a war party. They think the road is quiet now. That Murad Shah’s death buried the storm. We’ll remind them otherwise.”

One of the younger recruits spoke up—barely twenty, from Wardak, voice too light to be noticed unless he tried. “What do we do with the guards if they surrender?”

Akbar looked at him. “That depends on what they saw.”

Baaz chuckled and slapped the boy on the back. “You’ll learn fast.”

That night, in the house, Anara swept the floor again. Quiet. The new men had passed by the gate earlier, and she had watched from behind the curtain. She didn’t ask Akbar about them. But he told her anyway.

“Some will die,” he said, as he placed a small pouch of silver near the firewood stack. “Others will turn, maybe. If they do, I’ll know.”

She nodded, eyes down.

He added, “There’s food here for a week. If I don’t return in ten days, send word to Said Alam. He’ll get you out of Kabul.”

“You’ll return,” she said.

He looked at her.

“I always do,” he replied.

Then he left, coat wrapped tight, rifle across his back, and vanished into the night with the rest of the crew.

The trail east waited again—this time with new eyes behind him, new risks, and more mouths to feed if they returned alive.

They rode east by nightfall, the earth still soft from the thaw, horses kicking up the dark mud that clung like wet cloth to the hooves. The mountains sloped into a cruel gorge near Jagdalak, where caravan tracks narrowed to a single winding path beside the river. That was where Akbar planned to strike. Not on the open road where rifles could form a line, but in the gorge, where a man could kill from above and vanish like wind between rocks.

Baaz led the vanguard with Qadir. The others followed in pairs, cloaks drawn, faces covered. Gul Rahman, quiet as ever, rode rear guard, watching the hills, sometimes turning fully in the saddle without a word. The caravan was expected the next morning, leaving late from a Company waystation near Laghman. Two wagons, a dozen mules, eight guards in red and green coats. They carried rifles—but only two were breech-loaded, the rest flintlocks.

Akbar's men had fifteen cartridges between them.

That would have to be enough.

They reached the gorge at dawn. The sky was red, bruised at the edges, and the mist still clung to the stones along the river's edge. They split into two lines. Baaz and three men climbed the slope, finding cover behind tall boulders above the path. Akbar remained below with Gul Rahman, the boy from Wardak, and two others crouched behind a fold in the rock where the road curved.

Time passed slowly.

Hooves came first. Then the sound of wooden wheels on stone. The caravan moved lazily, not expecting anything. The guards laughed and argued as they came into view, two of them trailing far behind, one chewing on dried plum, the other trying to fix a twisted stirrup.

Akbar held up a hand. Waited.

Then gave the nod.

The boy from Wardak shouted suddenly from behind the rock.

One of the guards stood up in his saddle, confused, reaching for a musket—

And Baaz's first shot rang out from above, echoing down the gorge.

The man's body fell off the horse like a dropped bundle.

Chaos broke loose. The mule drivers screamed, one ran. Akbar stepped out and fired once, the ball slamming through a guard's chest. Gul Rahman charged forward with his knife, striking a man across the neck before the others could reload. Two more guards tried to retreat, one firing wildly into the gorge wall. The bullet sparked stone. Qadir dropped a rock from above—more instinct than plan—and it smashed the helmet clean off the man trying to run.

The last two Company men tried to flee into the trees, but the river was high and fast. They hesitated—one slipped on the wet rock. The other turned just in time to see Akbar's pistol raised.

He didn't fire.

He walked up to him.

"You speak Pashto?" Akbar asked.

The man nodded slowly, hands raised.

"Good," Akbar said. "Tell them what happened here."

"Who—who should I say—?"

"Tell them the land remembers. That they forgot its name."

Then he turned his back and walked away.

They stripped the wagons quick—rifles, gunpowder, linen bolts, tins of tea, bottles marked with red stamps. One crate was nailed shut—inside it were silver coins, about two hundred. That surprised even Baaz.

They didn't kill the mule drivers—just cut their ropes, gave each man a slap across the face, and sent them walking back toward Laghman.

By noon, they were gone, wind wiping away hoofprints.

That evening they returned to the camp above the gorge. Fires were small, smoke low, weapons cleaned in silence.

The boy from Wardak sat cross-legged, pale and shaking. His first real fight. He hadn't even fired his weapon. Akbar walked over and tossed him a piece of dried bread.

"You froze," he said.

The boy nodded.

"Next time you shoot," Akbar said, "or you carry bodies."

In Kabul, the smoke from new chimneys rose in the dawn air. The streets were quieter. Traders from the south passed through again. But word traveled faster than mules. By the time the crew returned, the Company had posted notices at the gates offering coin for information about the "Jagdalak Butchers."

And yet, no one spoke a word.

Not in the markets. Not in the quarters. Not even among the poor.

They feared something more than coin.

Akbar had become not a name—but a shadow, and it moved with them now.

The bazaar was busy that morning, a slow tide of footsteps and murmurs rolling through Kabul's narrow market alleys. Anara walked a step behind Akbar, her scarf drawn across her brow, head tilted toward the stalls—feeling fabric, asking prices. He kept close, always watching the men around her without showing it.

They passed by the cloth sellers, and she stopped to examine a robe of soft green. Akbar nodded to the vendor and leaned against a post, watching her run her fingers across the thread. She smiled, the way she hadn't in a long time, and he thought, "This is what gold should buy." No blades. No fear. Just silence and choice.

When Anara moved on, satisfied with two new dresses folded under her arm, Akbar let his steps drift sideways toward a quieter stall half-shuttered behind a curtain. A sign hung above it—paint faded, cracked—a book merchant, still alive in a city where most pages burned for heat. An old man sat cross-legged on a wool mat behind the table, thumbing through brittle parchment with thick hands. His beard was yellowed with age and smoke, his turban not white, but a dusty gray.

Akbar paused, eyes trailing the covers.

The old man looked up. "You read?"

"Sometimes," Akbar said.

"Then you should read better things."

Akbar glanced over the table. "You have Qurans?"

"I do. Old prints. Some from the north. But no new ones, not since the last caravan from Herat."

Akbar nodded. "That's fine. I only open it once a week. Not more."

The old man smirked. "Enough to stay seen."

Akbar didn't answer.

The man reached under the table, slowly, as if unsure whether to show what he meant to. Then he slid out a dark cloth bundle and unfolded it.

"This is something else."

A book, leather-bound, thick, faded.

"What is it?" Akbar asked.

“Manichaeism,” the man said. “It’s older. From the mountains east, and farther still. A prophet’s words. Not unlike our own. He was called Mani. Spoke of things your father’s father may have known. Before the mosques. Before the Company came. Light and dark, side by side.”

Akbar stared at the cover, unmoving. “Why are you showing me this?”

The man’s eyes didn’t waver. “Because some men walk with both feet in the night, and still hunger for morning.”

Akbar said nothing for a while. Then: “All right. I can read this.”

That afternoon, he returned home. Anara went to the courtyard, sorting her purchases quietly. He entered the back room, lit the oil lamp, and sat with the book open across his knees. The house was silent. Outside, the streets coughed with distant market sounds. He read slowly—his voice low, lips barely moving.

The words were like stone pressed into cloth.

Mani wrote of two worlds—one of pure light, the other of suffocating dark. The world of matter was fallen, cursed, a creation of darkness that trapped the light within flesh. Every soul, every man and woman, was a prisoner of this mix, bound by desire, violence, pride. Only through knowledge, he wrote—not prayers or blood—but *understanding*, could one begin to separate the soul from the weight of the world.

Akbar paused there.

His hands closed the book, fingers tight around the leather.

A strange feeling settled in his chest—not guilt, not shame, but a recognition. He’d seen too much of the dark. Not just in others. In himself. In the way he’d struck men, in how easily the blade had sunk into flesh, in how the sound of gunshots no longer stirred him. Yet every time he lit a fire, every time he gave Anara silver or bread or new clothes, something in him wanted to believe it was still for the light.

“Perhaps I’ve just learned to live inside the dark,” he murmured. “With my hands still reaching.”

He stared at the lamp, the flame flickering, warm but small.

There was no repentance in his mind. No prayers spoken. But for the first time in years, something uncoiled from the base of his skull—like the thread of a deeper thought winding its way up from below all the layers of killing and dust.

He kept reading.

That night he didn’t sleep.

Not because of guilt, but because the words had left him alert, awake in a way few things had. As though someone had told him the shape of the world, and for once, it made sense.

He did not speak of the book to Baaz. Nor to the others. But he returned to the stall a week later and left a coin behind for the old man without saying a word.

The book stayed hidden beneath his bed.

Yet the words stayed louder in his mind than the gunfire he'd lived with for years.

Fatima

A few days later, Akbar found himself back near the market without intending to be there. The city had its pull now—too many roads leading nowhere, too many faces that reminded him of things he hadn't lived yet. He walked past the spice stalls and the leather sellers, past the same corners where he had once watched men die, and then he saw her.

She moved through the crowd as if the noise bent around her. Her scarf was pale, her posture upright, her eyes lowered not in fear but in habit. She did not hurry. Men noticed her and looked away again, as if something about her presence warned them not to stare too long.

Akbar stopped.

He watched her pass, then turned and followed at a distance. Not close enough to draw attention, not far enough to lose her. She moved through two streets, then another, until the noise of the market thinned and the houses grew closer together. At a narrow door of worn wood she paused, lifted the latch, and slipped inside.

Akbar stood there for a long moment, staring at the door.

He returned the next morning before the city fully woke.

He waited near the wall, arms folded, the cold biting through his coat. When the door opened and she stepped out, basket in hand, he moved before his thought caught up with him. He crossed the street in three strides, seized her, and hoisted her up over his shoulder as she cried out in shock and terror. Her fists struck his back, her legs kicked wildly, her voice tearing through the street.

"Let me go! Help! HELP—"

People turned. Some froze. Some stepped back. No one intervened.

Akbar ran.

He did not slow until he reached Anara's house. He kicked the door open, carried her inside, and set her down roughly. She tried to run again, but he caught her wrist, tied her hands and feet with a rope from the corner, fast and practiced.

"We are going to get married," he said, breath still heavy, a strange smile crossing his face as if daring the world to deny him.

The woman sobbed, her body folding in on itself.

Anara stood frozen in the doorway, her face pale.

Akbar turned to her. "Bring water. Food."

He left immediately.

When he returned later, the house was quiet except for muffled crying. Anara sat beside the woman, holding a bowl of soup toward her.

"Eat," Anara said gently. "Crying will not change what has happened."

The woman shook her head, tears streaking her face.

"You will not be beaten here," Anara continued. "No one will touch you tonight. Drink. Your strength matters."

Slowly, trembling, the woman took the bowl.

The next day Akbar went to the imam.

"I want a marriage," he said flatly.

The old man looked at him over his beard. "Does the woman consent?"

Akbar's eyes hardened. "She will."

The imam hesitated, then sighed. "Then bring witnesses. Three days."

Akbar nodded.

He sent a note to her family that evening. Brief. Direct. No apology.

"Your daughter is with me. The wedding is in three days. Come if you want her alive and married. Or do not."

They came.

Her father first, face tight with shame and anger. Two uncles behind him. No weapons. No shouting. Only silence thick enough to choke on.

The ceremony was small. Awkward. Men stood stiffly. The imam recited words everyone had heard before but no one truly listened to. The woman—Fatima, her name now spoken aloud—sat still, eyes fixed on the floor.

When the imam asked her consent, her voice barely rose above breath.

“Yes.”

Anara watched her hands tremble.

Akbar said nothing. He only stood there, shoulders squared, as if daring fate to strike him down where he stood.

Afterward, bread was broken. Tea poured. No laughter followed.

One of Fatima’s uncles muttered to another as they left, “At least he did not kill her.”

Another replied, “At least.”

That night, Akbar sat alone outside the house. The book lay under his bed. The lamp burned low. Inside, Fatima lay silent, staring at the wall.

For two weeks Akbar stayed in Kabul, and for the first time in months, no plan was whispered over bread, no blade was cleaned at dawn. The house was quiet, wrapped in that strange silence that only follows long violence, as if even the dust had stopped to breathe. His men, scattered in alleys and lodgings around the city, drank, smoked, and waited. There were no commands. No raids. Just stillness.

Fatima spoke little. She moved through the rooms without sound, her scarf always drawn, her eyes lowered. When Akbar came in, she stood to the side, waiting to be told what to do. He ordered meals prepared at set hours, asked for the floor to be swept, clothes folded, water brought from the well. She did it all without resistance, though never with eagerness. Her face held the same expression every day—neither fear nor hatred, but the distant blankness of a woman taken and bound to the will of a stronger hand.

Akbar said little to her at first. Only what needed to be said.

But over time, he spoke more.

“Did you eat today?” he asked once, passing her in the kitchen.

She gave a quiet nod.

“Good,” he said. “Eat more. You’re thin like a winter branch.”

Another day he left a folded shawl on her bed, darker than the one she wore, softer. When she found it, she said nothing, only wore it the next morning without a word.

Then one evening, he returned home early, hung his coat, and saw her kneeling beside the stove, blowing gently at the coals. Her fingers were red from heat, her cheeks smudged with ash. He sat nearby and watched in silence. The fire caught, flared, and settled.

“You were angry when I brought you here,” he said.

She didn’t turn.

“You had a right to be,” he added.

Fatima didn’t speak.

“I have done worse to men than I did to you,” he said. “But none of them cook rice like you do.”

That made her pause. Her head tilted slightly. But still, no answer.

He rose and left her there, saying nothing more. That was enough.

Akbar didn’t leave the city. He slept late. Spent long hours on the roof in the sun with a blanket and the book of Mani open across his knees. The words began to take deeper root now—not just in his thoughts, but in his body, in how he moved and spoke.

He read of the kingdoms of light, how they were overrun by forces of dark matter—greed, pride, lust, hunger. How all men were fragments of light bound in the chains of this poisoned world. Every killing, every theft, every forced silence—he began to weigh them not by tribal law or revenge, but by whether they kept him from the light or brought him closer to it.

He did not repent. He did not seek forgiveness.

But he began to question.

“If a man robs a thief, who is chained? If a man kills to protect what he’s stolen, is the sin in the blood or in the hands that took?”

He stared at his palms often now, running his fingers over the calluses. These were the hands that buried his father. These were the same hands that had pulled women from their homes, had drawn knives across throats, had stolen bricks of opium in the night and shot men who begged to be spared.

Yet these same hands had wrapped bread for Anara. These same hands had laid silver on the table for Fatima’s clothing. These same hands turned the pages of a prophet’s words.

He did not speak of it to Baaz or the others.

The crew remained idle. A few grumbled. Baaz said, “You’ve gone soft, reading poems and letting the streets forget your name.” But Akbar only looked at him and replied, “Even a wolf lies down after the kill. Let them forget. The night will remind them when it comes.”

By the third week, Fatima’s silences had changed. She still did not speak much, but she no longer flinched when he passed behind her. She sometimes left bread and fruit for him near the door when he sat on the roof. And once, when the wind was strong and the shutters slammed open, she rose and closed them without being told.

One night, she sat beside the fire longer than usual. Akbar entered, hands dusted with charcoal from cleaning the rifle barrels. She looked up briefly.

“The stew will be ready soon,” she said softly.

He nodded. Then sat down nearby, tired.

Outside, Kabul remained cold. Rumors moved through the alleys—of caravans forming near Ghazni, of new taxes demanded by warlords in the south, of the British Company sending scouts north again. Akbar heard them all, but did not move.

Not yet.

The light and dark within him were not finished wrestling.

Winter deepened, and with it Akbar’s stillness hardened into something deliberate. The house became a fixed point in the city, a place where no shouting crossed the threshold and no blade was drawn. Fatima moved through it as if learning its bones, her work quiet and exact. She cooked what was needed, cleaned what was dirtied, and spoke only when the task required it. When she did speak, Akbar listened without looking at her, which was how he listened to things he did not yet want to name.

He spent his days reading and rereading the book, not from devotion but from recognition. The words did not promise him cleansing or mercy. They described a world already split, already broken, and a man already placed where he belonged. The struggle was not to become pure, the text suggested, but to understand one’s portion of the burden. Light was fragile, scattered. Darkness was weight and substance, the thing that endured. Akbar closed the book often and sat with that thought, letting it settle like ash.

At night, when the city thinned to whispers and the dogs went quiet, he would sit by the lamp and think, “If the world feeds on cruelty, then cruelty is not an accident.” He did not pray more. He prayed less. When he did, it was brief and without ceremony, a habit kept only so the neighbors would not talk. Inwardly, his thoughts moved elsewhere. Not toward rebellion against God, but toward a recognition that some men were made to carry the darker load so others could pretend not to see it. He did not say this aloud. He did not need to.

Baaz came by once, unannounced, and found him reading. “You look like a mullah,” Baaz said, trying to smile.

Akbar closed the book with his thumb. “I look like a man who’s tired.”

Baaz leaned against the wall. “There’s work again. A road south of Ghazni. Easy pickings.”

“Not yet,” Akbar said.

Baaz studied him. “You’ve changed.”

Akbar met his eyes. “No. I’ve stopped pretending.”

Baaz left without arguing.

Fatima noticed the change before anyone else did. It was not in what Akbar did, but in what he no longer avoided. He sat longer in the dark, sometimes without lighting the lamp at all. He preferred the rooms when the shutters were closed. When she brought food, he would thank her with a nod and eat in silence, his face half-lit, half-lost. Once, as she passed him a bowl, her fingers brushed his, and he did not pull away. He did not reach for her either. He only held the contact for a moment longer than necessary, then let go.

“You don’t sleep much,” she said one evening, the words escaping her before she could stop them.

“I sleep enough,” he replied.

She hesitated. “You dream?”

He considered this. “I remember,” he said. “That’s worse.”

She said nothing more.

As weeks passed, men began to come to the house again, one at a time, careful and quiet. Not to drink, not to boast. To ask. Akbar received them in the outer room, listened, and sent most away with nothing but a look. To a few, he gave small tasks that had nothing to do with killing. Watching a road. Carrying a message. Standing somewhere and being seen. His name, which had dimmed, began to take on a different shape. Not loud. Not wild. Heavy.

One night, after the lamp had burned low, Akbar sat alone and opened the book again. He traced a line with his finger and thought, “If salvation comes through knowledge, then knowledge comes through acceptance.” He did not ask to be forgiven for what he was. He accepted it. He felt the fit of it settle in his chest, like armor finally sized correctly. Darkness was not a rebellion. It was a role.

From that night on, when he walked the city, he chose the shaded side of the street. When he listened, he listened for what was not said. When he acted, he did so without haste and

without apology. Fatima watched this quietly, learning when to speak and when to remain still. She did not love him. Not yet. But she no longer feared him in the way she once had. Fear had become something else, slower and more complicated.

Beyond Kabul, the roads stirred again. Spring would come. Caravans would move. Men would test old boundaries and forget old warnings. Akbar knew this as surely as he knew his own hands. He did not hurry toward it. He waited, content in the knowledge that when the darkness was needed, it would call for him by name.

The snow melted slowly that year, leaving Kabul wet with cold mornings and the smell of stone and mud. Inside the house, time changed shape. Fatima moved more slowly now, her hands often resting on her growing belly, her steps quieter, more deliberate. She no longer flinched when Akbar entered a room. She no longer avoided his eyes.

One night, when the wind was low and no dogs barked in the streets, Akbar closed the book early and went to her. He said nothing, only looked at her. Fatima turned from the lamp, her eyes holding his longer than they ever had before.

She did not resist.

She did not cry.

She did not smile either.

When morning came, she lay curled beneath the blanket, and Akbar sat beside the window with the book in his lap, staring out at the pale sky. He did not feel shame. Nor triumph. Just silence.

Weeks passed.

Fatima's shape changed, her back heavier, her steps slower. Akbar did not speak of it aloud, but he brought her fruit now, softened bread, hot broth. Sometimes when she walked, he watched her with something like awe, not at her, but at the work the body did without permission, how something unseen could grow in the middle of this dust-heavy life.

He did not speak gently. He did not touch her often.

But when he looked at her now, there was weight in it. Presence.

The book became a tool. At night he read aloud—not to her, but to himself, though she heard him from the other room. His voice low, clear, steady.

"From the Realm of Light, messengers descend to awaken the trapped sparks in men. They bring not law, but memory."

He memorized the lines.

He carved one into the wood of the window frame with his knife.

"The world is a wound, and knowledge is the thread."

Word of his speech began to move quietly through the lower quarters of Kabul. Not in the mosques, but in the alleys. The men who once rode with him came again, one or two at first, then more. They sat on the carpet in his house, leaning against the wall, their weapons stacked in the corner. Not drunk. Not laughing. Listening.

Baaz was always first to come, always with his sharp tongue ready. "You preaching now?" he said one evening, squatting down near the fire. "I remember when you could barely count your bullets."

Akbar didn't smile. "I still count them. I just count other things now too."

Yahya spoke up. "What's this book about then? You think it'll make us better men?"

"No," Akbar said. "I don't care if you become better. I care if you understand what you already are."

Baaz scratched his beard. "And what are we?"

Akbar looked around the room. The flicker of the oil lamp danced over the walls. "You are sparks of light buried in the black of this world. That's why we suffer. That's why the world claws at us. Because we are broken pieces of something older, and the darkness wants to hold us."

Qadir nodded slowly. "That makes more sense than half the Friday sermons I've heard."

Akbar leaned forward. "We kill. We steal. Not for love of it—but because we were shaped in a world that strangles the clean thing inside us. You've felt it. After the fight, after the coin, after the silence—when you sit alone, and nothing tastes sweet."

They were quiet for a while.

Then Baaz said, "You're dangerous when you talk like that."

"Good," Akbar said. "Words should do something. Like blades."

They kept coming.

Not every night. But often enough.

They brought food, firewood, even offerings from raids—coins, weapons, cloth. One man brought a small oil lamp with glass stained blue and green, placed it at Akbar's feet, and said nothing. Another brought a dead fox's pelt and left it on the doorstep. It meant something. No one explained what.

Fatima watched them come and go, never interfering. She swept the floor after they left, poured water into the tea basin, wiped the corners of the room. But one night she sat longer in the hallway, listening to Akbar's voice echo in the stone walls.

"We are not forgiven. We are not cursed. We are chosen to suffer because something in us still burns."

She placed her hand on her stomach and closed her eyes.

Something moved within her.

The child was not born yet, but already the house had changed.

Soon, Akbar would no longer be just a name feared in the valleys. He would be a man with men under him, words behind him, and a lineage inside his house.

And still the darkness grew.

Mullah

By early spring, Akbar's house no longer belonged to him alone. The door rarely stayed shut, the lamps were kept lit past midnight, and voices murmured day and night inside the walls. Men came quietly, some wrapped in coarse wool, others in the loose vests of travelers, some even barefoot. They did not come for food or shelter. They came to listen.

And they began to call him *Mullah*.

At first, Akbar said nothing to it. Then he accepted it. Then, in time, he dressed to match what they already believed. A black *chadar* wrapped over his shoulders, a turban the color of coal tied tight around his brow, a long scarf drawn over the nose when he walked the streets. A knife, always sheathed at his hip, and a small black book kept close to his chest. He no longer needed to carry a flintlock. Others carried them for him.

One evening, with over a dozen men gathered in the room, he stood in the center, hand resting lightly on the book, and spoke. The air was thick with ash and sweat and the slow drift of opium from the brazier in the corner.

"The world," he said, "is not cruel because men are wicked. It is cruel because it is built on the bones of a broken thing. A thing that wanted to be whole again."

He looked around. Faces stared back—hard men, scarred, silent, armed. But they listened as children do when they hope something true is coming.

“You suffer not because you deserve it,” Akbar continued, “but because something in you still glows. The wolves do not bite rotten meat. They smell the warmth in your blood and come for it.”

Baaz grunted, shifting on his heel. “So we’re better than the ones who never got hunted?”

Akbar turned slightly. “No. We are only more awake.”

Another man—Dawar, thin, quiet, always listening—asked, “And what do we do with this... waking?”

“You choose,” Akbar said. “You choose whether to guard that light or feed it to the dark. But understand: even the dark has use. Even it obeys a law.”

“Which law?” Baaz asked.

Akbar’s hand tapped the book. “That nothing escapes without paying.”

Silence followed.

Over the next weeks, he began to give longer sermons. He spoke not as a preacher, but as a man explaining how iron becomes steel, how wood becomes ash. The men sat close, sometimes arms resting on knees, knives by their feet. No one brought wine. No one asked about gold.

They asked about meaning.

When the time came to send them out again, Akbar gave no direct order. He called them by name, one at a time.

To Baaz: “Take three men. Ride toward Paghman. There’s a route under the ridge. A small caravan moves there, once a week. Don’t hurt them if they yield.”

To Dawar: “You know the caves past Charikar. Traders sleep there when storms roll down. Wait. They carry resin, bolts of cloth, maybe some silver. Bring it.”

To Rahim: “Go with Yahya. You’re both clever. Look poor. Travel on foot. Use words first.”

Each time, Akbar placed a hand on their shoulder when they left, not as a blessing, but as a mark. They returned in days. They returned with coin. They returned loyal.

He paid them equally.

He fed them from the same bowl.

“You follow me not for gold,” he told them, “but because the world has tried to grind you down, and here, you are sharpened instead.”

The house became a place men sought when their hearts were worn through and their hands still needed to fight.

Some said the *Mullah* was creating a sect.

Others whispered it was a cult.

But those inside did not use such words. They called it *brotherhood*.

And Akbar said only, “We are not trying to save the world. We are learning how not to be crushed by it.”

Outside, Kabul continued to change. New taxes were spoken of. The Company had sent men through the passes again. Warlords circled smaller towns. The city felt calm only because the pressure had not yet burst.

Inside the black walls of Akbar’s house, something was being shaped in the dark—slowly, with heat, with silence, with steel.

Outside the house, dusk had just settled over Kabul. The call to prayer echoed faintly from distant minarets, but in Akbar’s courtyard no one moved toward the mosque. Inside, the followers sat cross-legged, their backs to the walls, lamps lit, the book lying open on the table before Akbar. He was speaking softly, not of caravans or raids, but of the soul.

“The world,” he said, “feeds you with lies before it feeds on you. You suffer, and you are told to pray harder. You bleed, and are told it is a test. But the truth is this: the one who made this world either turned away… or was devoured by it.”

It was then the knock came.

Heavy. Slow. A measured hand, not a frantic one.

Baaz stood and opened the door. An old man entered, wrapped in white, his beard yellowed by years of dust and tobacco. His eyes were sharp and hard, and he carried no smile.

“I am Imam Sharif,” he said.

Akbar did not stand. “Then speak, Imam.”

The old man looked around, taking in the weapons, the smoke, the silent men. His nose wrinkled.

“I have heard of you. Of this—” he gestured with disgust, “—teaching.”

“It is not for you,” Akbar said.

“You are preaching light and darkness,” the imam snapped. “So does the Quran. Light is guidance. Darkness is disbelief.”

Akbar tilted his head. “You repeat what you’ve heard. I speak what I’ve lived.”

Sharif stepped forward, anger rising. “You lead men to a pagan thing. A book of error, older than the Prophet, condemned and buried for good reason.”

Akbar’s face didn’t change. “Buried by men afraid of seeing clearly.”

“You deny the One God?” Sharif hissed.

“I deny the illusion that God listens,” Akbar said calmly. “I’ve prayed. Buried kin. Bled in cold fields. No answer. No wind but the one that cuts your skin. You sell hope, Imam. I deal in what *is*.”

Sharif’s voice rose. “You dare stand in Kabul and speak heresy?”

“I don’t stand in Kabul,” Akbar said. “Kabul stands around me.”

The room held its breath. The imam’s jaw tightened.

“This is not over,” he muttered. “You will regret what you’ve stirred.” He turned, robe sweeping the dust behind him as he vanished into the street.

Two hours later, as the lamplight burned low and tea boiled faintly on the fire, the first stone struck the wall.

Then another.

Shouts followed.

“False preacher!”

“Godless swine!”

“Come out, Mullah of the shadows!”

Akbar rose without rush. He looked to Baaz, who had already taken his blade from the wall. “Let’s teach them courtesy.”

The men stood, all of them, no one hesitating. Yahya opened the door and stepped out into the cold. Eight figures stood in the alley, faces veiled, arms raised to throw.

Baaz didn’t wait.

He ran.

A stone flew past his head as he crashed into the nearest figure, knocking him to the ground. The others followed, yelling, fists flying. Akbar stepped out last, quiet and watching.

The fight was ugly. Fast.

Yahya cracked one man’s ribs with a boot. Rahim took another down and slammed his head against the stones until he stopped moving. The imam’s followers tried to flee, but the narrow alley held them long enough for Akbar’s men to break through. Two stumbled into the street and vanished, one limping badly, another without his turban.

Akbar didn’t strike. He walked among the noise, past blood on the dust, past groans and curses. He stopped at one of the men still curled on the ground.

“Tell your Imam,” Akbar said, his voice steady, “that when light and darkness meet—only one leaves standing.”

The man nodded, shaking, his lip split open.

Akbar turned and walked back inside.

The others followed.

Inside the house, Fatima swept broken clay from the threshold. She didn’t look at the men as they returned. She placed a basin of water by the door and left.

Baaz wiped blood from his mouth and sat. “That imam’s going to stir trouble.”

Akbar nodded. “Then let him. I don’t preach to keep peace. I preach to say what is.”

Yahya laughed softly. “You’ll have more than stones next time.”

“Then we’ll give them something heavier to carry back.”

The lamp flickered.

Outside, the alley was quiet again.

Inside, the dark gathered not with fear—but with purpose.

The shouting began before dawn. Echoes down the alley. Iron on stone. The thud of boots.

Baaz was sharpening a blade on the threshold when he looked up. “They’ve come.”

Akbar was already standing, hand on the spine of the black book, eyes calm.

Outside, twenty men filled the narrow street. Some carried long hunting rifles, others thick sticks wrapped in cloth, sharpened stakes, stones tied in slings. Their leader—bearded, turbaned, face dark with fury—stepped forward and raised his arm.

“You were warned!” he bellowed. “Kabul is not for heretics! You mock the Quran with this filth you speak!”

Behind him, one of his men raised a flintlock and fired.

The bullet struck Rahim in the chest, knocking him back into the doorway. He collapsed, mouth open, no breath coming out.

Baaz didn’t wait.

He roared like an animal and charged, blade high. Thirty men followed behind him—Akbar’s full house, already armed, already expecting this day.

Steel cracked against bone. Stones flew. One of Akbar’s men tackled an attacker and drove a dagger into his neck again and again until the blood sprayed the walls. Smoke from flintlocks hung low in the air. Muzzles flashed. A scream broke from the right side as one of the attackers was caught in the thigh, fell, and was beaten with the butt of a musket.

Akbar walked into the street slowly. He did not shout. He did not run.

A man lunged at him with a blade.

Akbar twisted, sidestepped, caught the man’s wrist, and rammed his own knife under the ribs. The man gasped and folded like cloth. Akbar looked up at another charging toward him. He shot him cleanly through the gut, smoke wrapping around his hand like mist.

Bodies piled. Blood spread in dark pools over the cobbles.

When it was done, four of Akbar’s men lay dead. Two more were bleeding badly.

The imam's gang had been destroyed. The last man fled limping down the alley, screaming for God.

Akbar turned back toward the house.

"Fatima!" he called. "Anara!"

They came at once, cloaked and ready. No panic. They had known.

Inside, Akbar dropped to one knee and pulled the floorboards free. He gathered the coin—silver and copper—into a sack. He took the black book, wrapped it in cloth, tied it across his chest. He rolled up two blankets, strapped food in cloth sacks to the saddle.

To Baaz he said, "Load the horses. We're leaving."

"Where?" Baaz asked.

"Somewhere the darkness can't find us."

They rode out of Kabul under a half-light sky. Smoke still hung behind them. Blood still wet on their boots. Akbar rode first, then the women, then the men, those left. Twenty-three in all. Flintlocks slung across backs, blades at hips. The road into the mountains was hard. Cold. Long.

After three hours, Baaz pointed ahead.

"There," he said. "Cave. Over the ridge."

The cave mouth was wide and black, hidden by jagged rock. Inside, it opened deeper than they'd expected, walls narrow and cool, the scent of bat dung and old smoke in the air. Someone had used it before.

Akbar stood at the mouth, looking down the slope toward the distant city lights. Then he turned inside, placed the black book gently on a flat stone, and sat.

Fatima sat beside Anara, laying out a cloth with bread and dates. No one spoke for a while.

The fire crackled low, licking at a pot of goat stew that bubbled and spat over the flames. Around it sat two dozen men, their faces drawn from the wind, their hands resting on flintlocks and blades. Akbar sat on a stone ledge near the fire, black scarf wrapped across his shoulders, eyes catching the firelight like coal in ash.

He looked to Yahya, who stood waiting.

"You'll go back to the city," Akbar said. "The markets are crowded before dusk. Two sacks of flour. Oil. Dried figs. Don't speak my name, only trade. Then disappear."

Yahya nodded, took the pouch of silver and left with three others.

Akbar turned to Baaz. “And you—go east. There’s a caravan due from Jalalabad. Horses and cloth. Take it. Leave the guards breathing if you can. If not…”

Baaz smirked. “They’ll breathe through their throats.”

“No blood in the town roads,” Akbar said. “They’ll call for the soldiers. Hit them on the rocks. Bring the mules. Leave the corpses for the crows.”

The crew rose and moved, some with purpose, some with prayer. Others sat still, waiting for their orders.

In the coming days, they returned — first with food, then with news. Blankets, rice sacks, dried meats. One man brought a live goat tied with rope. Another carried stolen spices from a merchant who didn’t see the blade behind the coin.

But more than food, they brought *ears*.

Men began arriving from Kabul. From smaller villages nearby. Some rode up the slopes with nothing but dust on their cloaks and questions in their mouths.

They came to listen.

By the fourth week, there were fifty men gathered in the main cavern. A few made copies of Akbar’s words, scratching with ink onto hide, paper, bark — whatever they could find. Each night, Akbar stood before them as the fire cast tall shadows along the stone walls.

He no longer shouted. He spoke like stone speaks — slow, steady, impossible to ignore.

“We were born into a world where light is promised but never shown. We are told to kneel. To beg. And still — the hungry starve. The pure are killed. The good die with their hands empty.”

The fire hissed as fat from the stew hit the coals.

“The world is not ruled by mercy. It is ruled by law. Not law written on paper — but carved into the bone of things. And that law says: the strong eat. The rest are eaten.”

One man raised his hand. “What is the purpose then, if there is no saving?”

“There *is* saving,” Akbar said. “Not from above. Not from gods. From within. From knowing the truth. You are the spark. Not the flame. The flame burns you. The spark escapes.”

They murmured, nodding, some bowing their heads.

That night, he stood at the edge of the cavern while men cleaned their rifles and stacked food.

Fatima stood nearby, quietly laying fresh bread by the fire. Anara swept the sand near the wall where some of the wounded rested. The cave had become a village.

Below the firepit, beneath packed earth and stone, lay the hidden tunnel — and within it, Akbar’s growing chest of silver, wrapped opium bricks, and cloth-wrapped texts.

They were ready now.

And in the city, the imam had grown quieter. The blood spilled in Kabul had not been avenged. His men had returned bruised, frightened, defeated. He had sent riders east and west, thinking Akbar had fled the region entirely.

He was wrong.

Two months later, they called Akbar the Black Mullah.

Men carved the name into cave walls.

It was whispered in the souks and taverns by travelers. Some feared it. Others waited for it to reach them.

And at all times, two men sat at the mouth of the cave — rifles across their knees — guarding the man who had gone into the mountains and returned as something else.

Snow clung to the high ridges like dry salt. The mountain air burned in the lungs, but the caves below were warm with smoke and sweat. Two months had passed since the blood in Kabul. The Imam’s riders had reached as far as Wardak, then doubled back. They asked for

names in whispers, pressed silver into palms, but found no trail. No one in the capital had seen the Black Mullah. Some believed he was dead. Others said he had fled to Baluchistan or into India. The Imam, now careful not to stir chaos with open war, spoke little of him.

But in the mountains, Akbar's numbers had swollen.

At first, they came in twos and threes. Shepherd boys who had lost their flocks to tax collectors. Outlaws from Paghman. Deserting soldiers from distant posts. Then came the men who had heard of a speaker whose words cut deeper than prayer, whose hands held both scripture and steel. A man who said the world was ruled by shadow, but the truth was light hidden *within* the dark.

Now, the cave was no longer a hideout. It was a camp. Then a camp no longer — a base.

There were now one hundred and twenty men, and a few boys who fetched water, carried firewood, fed the goats. The oldest sat nearest the fire, loyal from the first days. The newer ones built outer shelters from stone and packed snow, sleeping beneath blankets of wool, their flintlocks wrapped in leather to keep the cold from rusting the triggers.

Akbar stood at the front of the cavern as the fire crackled and the sound of chewing, coughing, and quiet murmurs died down. His voice did not need to rise. They silenced themselves for him.

"Light does not fall from heaven," he said. "It must be carved out from darkness like meat from bone."

They watched him closely — not as villagers look to a mullah, but as soldiers watch a commander, waiting not just for wisdom, but orders.

"Those who taught you to kneel told you this world would reward your submission. But you begged, and they took your bread. You obeyed, and they sent your sons to die for other men's names. You prayed, and the night remained."

A man near the wall spoke, voice rough. "And what now, Black Mullah? What does the night owe us?"

Akbar turned toward him.

"It owes you nothing. But you owe yourselves fire."

He gestured to the rows of men before him.

"You are not farmers now. Not shepherds. Not thieves. You are men who have seen the truth — that the world is a knife, and you must learn to hold the blade."

Outside, sentries stood on watch with long rifles over their shoulders. They had names now for their posts: East Rock, Goat's Spine, Dead Hollow. Men patrolled in groups of three. They carried horn signals and oil lamps. One man had drawn a map of the valley, scratched into hide, showing every pass and hidden footpath.

Below, Akbar's wealth was buried in the tunnel behind the far wall — a wooden chest of silver, another of sealed opium bricks. The coin was used sparingly: to buy weapons from smugglers, to pay off spies in the city, to grease the hands of mule-drivers who delivered fresh dates and flour from traders too hungry to ask questions.

One night, Baaz approached him near the fire with two younger men behind him.

"These boys want to serve near you," Baaz said. "They can read, write, both been in knife fights. I trust them."

Akbar looked them over, then nodded. "They'll stay in the cave. They'll hear every word. If they ever betray it, I'll cut their tongues."

The boys nodded in silence, wide-eyed.

Baaz smirked and stepped back.

Later that night, as the fire burned low, Fatima brought a plate of hot meat and bread, setting it by his side without a word. She sat on the stone next to him, quiet. The two young guards took up position by the entrance, rifles across their knees.

Anara returned from the stream, arms red from washing the clothes of the wounded. She whispered a prayer and sat down beside the others.

Akbar stared at the fire, one hand on the black book resting in his lap. The sparks rose, vanishing into smoke.

"We are many now," he said aloud, as if to no one.

Baaz, standing behind him, replied.

"Not many. Just enough."

The two men left before dawn, wrapped in black wool with curved knives hidden beneath their cloaks. One carried a small satchel of dates, the other a flask of sour milk — just enough to look like travelers. Neither spoke as they passed the lower passes, then rode along the streambeds that twisted toward the capital. It took two days to reach Kabul. On the third, they waited by the city walls until the gate guards thinned, then entered with a slow mule cart and vanished into the alleys of dusk.

Target was the Imam, who had once stood before the crowded mosque court to denounce the man they followed. He had called for fire and steel, and sent others to finish what his tongue had begun. But he had failed. And now Akbar had chosen to answer.

The two men found the old house near the southern quarter, with thick stone walls and a narrow yard. The gate was bolted, but the outer wall was crumbling where the winter rains had loosened the brick. One man climbed. The other followed. They crossed the yard with steps soft as dust, then pried open the back shutter and slipped inside.

The cleric sat alone in the kitchen, a bowl of rice and lentils steaming before him. His beard was wet from drink. He didn't hear them until the blade touched the back of his neck. One man held him down, the other struck. No screams, only a dry gasp as his blood ran across the table.

They wiped the blade, turned, and slipped back the way they came. The body slumped forward into his meal, unmoving.

By morning, Kabul roared.

The home was found by a servant. Guards sealed the street. Some wept. Traders whispered. The court was shaken. But there were no names, no clues. Only silence and a clean cut. Some said foreign agents. Others swore it was a blood feud from years ago. Still others wondered if the man once named Black Mullah had returned.

But Akbar remained where no one could see him. In the dark.

That night in the cave, firelight danced across the sandstone walls. The faces of his followers were still, eyes fixed on the man in the black chadar. He rose from his place, lifted the small black-bound book from the stone ledge, and began to speak.

"In the name of Light and the eternal battle against Darkness, we gather today as children of the radiant divine. Let us open our hearts and minds to the profound wisdom that has graced our existence."

He walked slowly before them, voice calm, measured.

"We embrace the cosmic struggle between Light and Darkness. Understand that within each of us lies the potential to embody goodness or succumb to evil. Light is the source of all wisdom, love, and harmony. Darkness symbolizes ignorance and despair."

The men nodded, some pressing palms to their chests.

"We must choose to align ourselves with the forces of Light, drawing upon the wisdom that will lead us toward salvation. In the spirit of our faith, we are called to seek gnosis — the hidden knowledge that enables us to transcend the material realm."

Baaz stood near the back, arms folded, listening.

“Each of us is a traveler on the path to truth,” Akbar said. “This knowledge is not found in dogmas or in the rituals of dead men. It shines only through understanding — through the flame that does not burn but reveals.”

A hush fell over the cave.

“We are the custodians of this truth. It is our sacred duty to spread the light far and wide. Let us rise as a brotherhood of awakened souls, standing firm against the blind ideologies that divide, that chain, that dim the spark of the divine within us.”

He raised the book once more, then closed it.

“Remember, the world craves truth. And we are its flame.”

Outside, the wind howled across the peaks. But within the cave, the light held.

The name moved without feet, without horses, without letters. It passed from hand to hand with bowls of tea in the market, crossed lips in low tones during late prayers, and coiled into the silence of household kitchens. They no longer called him by his birth name. He was *Mullah-e-Siyah*, the Black Mullah. Some said he had fled across the frontier into Persia, where he studied sorcery and returned in robes black as coal. Others claimed he spoke to angels in the mountain fog. One butcher in the bazaar swore he had seen the Mullah’s shadow on the walls near the Shah’s stables—though he could not say what the man looked like.

No one in Kabul knew where he was. But his name now lingered longer than sermons.

Once, he had stood in the streets of the capital, his flintlock tucked beneath his coat, blood still drying on the blade at his side. Now, he was no longer a man in the city. He was something beyond reach. Only his most trusted were allowed to ride into the valleys and vanish among the snow-fed streams. Only those who had proven their loyalty through fire and knife ever saw the cave again. It became a rite — to hear him in person.

In the cave, his days had grown quiet.

The boy was born on a cold evening as the wind pushed against the rock face with a low moan. Akbar sat outside near the fire pit, his hands folded, a blanket wrapped across his shoulders. Inside, Fatima screamed once — then twice more. Then silence. Anara emerged a while later with blood on her wrists and a small smile on her lips.

“He breathes,” she said.

Akbar stood, stepped into the chamber, and saw her there — Fatima pale and exhausted, the child in her arms. The boy’s eyes were open, dark as ink. His skin, still red, glistened in

the torchlight. Akbar crouched beside them and said nothing for a long time. Then he reached out and placed his hand gently over the child's chest.

"He will grow among the fire and stone," he said. "And never kneel."

Later, the news of the birth passed among the cave's inhabitants as they ate. Some called it a sign. Others said that now the path was marked — a child born into the mountain, beneath the words of their teacher, beside the opium and silver.

Baaz brought in a goat that evening, and the men roasted its meat over the flames. That night, Akbar sat beside the fire with his infant son swaddled in cloth, and spoke not of raids or wisdom — but only stared quietly into the fire, as if trying to see what future the flames might hold.

Behind him, young men scratched ink onto cloth, copying his earlier words.

"Light must be *fought for*," one of them whispered aloud as he transcribed. "It will not fall into your hands like fruit from a tree."

More men arrived in the weeks that followed, slipping in from Ghazni, from Uruzgan, from the dust roads near Herat. None spoke of Kabul openly, but all had heard stories. One man said the Shah's guards were looking for a preacher who had spoken against the city clerics. Another said old traders refused to speak the name *Mullah-e-Siyah* aloud — not out of hate, but fear of summoning him.

Akbar heard all this, and simply nodded.

He spoke less now, though his words carried further. His presence had turned from fire to smoke, thick and lingering. The cave no longer held men alone — it held a purpose.

The visitor arrived on the sixth day, veiled in the dust of travel and silence. His escort had changed three times across the provinces — once near Herat, once at the foot of Koh-e-Baba, and again near the edge of Akbar's mountain range. By the time he reached the cave, his beard was grey with ash and his cloak carried the scent of smoke and sandalwood. He was lean, taller than most, and spoke little as he entered, bowing to the guards but not averting his eyes.

They led him through the tunnel to the large chamber, where Akbar sat near the fire, stroking the head of his sleeping son. The others withdrew at a gesture.

The scholar stepped forward and greeted him in fluent Dari.

"You have been spoken of in whispers," he said. "I have followed the signs, and I come in peace."

Akbar rose slowly. His black scarf was wrapped tight around his head, the edge of his blade visible beneath his cloak. He studied the man.

“And you call yourself a follower of the Light?” Akbar asked.

“I call myself a servant of the truth,” the man replied. “I have studied the scrolls of Mani in Istakhr and walked the temple ruins of Ctesiphon. I have read the ten books and memorized seven. I have taught, debated, and wandered. And now I am here.”

Akbar nodded once and motioned to the stones by the fire.

“Sit. Speak, then. I will listen.”

They sat.

The fire popped between them, and the wind moaned in the cave’s distant mouth.

The scholar began. “You teach that Light and Darkness are cosmic forces, eternal and opposed. This is sound. You teach that we are caught in this struggle — sparks buried in mud. Also true. But there is more. The material world, all that we touch, is a prison made by Darkness. It is not just corrupted — it is false. Salvation lies in ascension, in freeing the soul from flesh, through fasting, study, and holy suffering.”

Akbar was quiet for a moment. Then he said, “I do not reject the flesh. My son was born beneath this mountain. His cry was real. His eyes are real. His heartbeat is not a lie.”

The scholar smiled faintly.

“You speak like one who has not yet tasted the weight of renunciation.”

Akbar leaned forward.

“I have renounced what others fear to face — mercy. Weakness. The illusion that goodness alone will feed men or protect them from knives. My path is through the mud. If the Light is to rise, it must rise *within the fight*, not above it.”

The scholar studied him now more carefully.

“And what of murder? Of theft? Are these not chains of Darkness?”

“They are,” Akbar said. “But the world is already bound in those chains. I do not worship murder. I wield it, when the night demands it.”

The scholar paused, stirred the ash with a stick.

“Your teachings carry heat, Akbar. They burn. Men follow fire because it is bright — but brightness does not always lead to truth.”

“Then what does?”

The scholar pointed to his heart.

“Stillness. Suffering. The Light is soft. It does not shout.”

Akbar looked at the fire for a long time. Then he said, “Stillness never fed a starving boy. Softness never saved a sister from being sold.”

The scholar nodded.

“Then perhaps we walk two paths toward the same mountain. One by fire. One by wind.”

Akbar stood, offering the man a hand.

“Then stay and speak. My men need to hear your words. And you, perhaps, need to see what the world is *really* like outside the libraries.”

The scholar took his hand.

“I will stay. For a time.”

And so, the scholar slept in the cave that night. And the next evening, before the followers gathered, both men stood before them — one in white, the other in black — and the fire between them.

The nights grew longer as winter tightened its grip on the mountains, and the great cavern became a place of gathering not just for warmth, but for words. Farid, the scholar from the western ruins, had accepted Akbar’s invitation to stay. He slept on a simple wool mat near the fire, ate the same coarse bread and mutton as the others, and spoke only when the men asked—or when Akbar called him forward.On the first evening after his arrival, Akbar stood before the assembled followers, the firelight carving deep shadows across his scarred face.

“This man,” Akbar said, gesturing toward Farid, “has walked farther than any of us in search of the old truths. He has read the scrolls that were buried before our grandfathers drew breath. I have spoken to you of Light trapped in Darkness, of the spark within the flesh. Tonight, let him add what he knows. Listen well. Knowledge is a blade—sharpen it.”

Farid rose slowly, his white robe a pale contrast to the black wool and leather around him. He did not challenge Akbar’s authority; he simply began, his voice soft but clear, carrying to the farthest corners of the chamber.

“You have been taught the war between realms,” he said.

“This is right. But hear also the deeper teaching: the world of matter is not merely corrupted —it is the creation of the Prince of Darkness himself, a prison built to hold the particles of Light stolen from the divine realm. Every tree, every stone, every body carries fragments of

that stolen Light. To wound the world is to wound the divine. The path of the Elect is abstinence—not just from sin, but from the very act of harming what contains the sacred sparks. Fasting, stillness, the rejection of fleshly desire—these loosen the chains."

The men listened in silence. Some nodded slowly, absorbing the words like dry earth takes water. Others frowned, weighing the idea against the rifles at their sides and the hunger that had driven them here. No one interrupted. Baaz sat with arms folded, eyes narrowed but attentive. Even the youngest boys, who usually fidgeted, sat still.When Farid finished, Akbar spoke again.

"These are truths," he said simply. "They add to what we know. The Light must be understood before it can be defended."

For the next weeks, the cavern echoed with voices raised not in anger, but in exploration. Each evening, after the day's work—patrolling the ridges, mending weapons—Akbar and Farid would sit by the central fire, and the men would gather.

They debated gently, like two blacksmiths testing the same steel from different angles.Farid spoke of renunciation, of the holy suffering that purified the soul, of the ancient Elect who ate only what fell from plants without harming them.

Akbar listened, then countered: "If we all fast until we are ghosts, who will stand when the Darkness sends its soldiers? The spark must live long enough to escape. Strength is not the enemy of Light—it is its guardian in this world."Farid never opposed him openly. He would nod, consider, then offer another layer:

"Strength without knowledge becomes the tool of Darkness. Knowledge without strength remains imprisoned."

The followers drank it in. They repeated phrases to one another while cleaning rifles or carrying water. Some began fasting one day a week. Others argued late into the night about whether a raid freed sparks or scattered them. The cave, once a refuge of steel and silence, became a place of learning—rough, hungry, alive.Farid watched it all with quiet awe. He saw hardened raiders copying words onto scraps of hide by torchlight, saw boys reciting passages they barely understood, saw men who had killed without hesitation now pausing to consider the cost in divine fragments. He told Akbar one night, as they walked the upper tunnel, "I have taught in temples and courts. Never have I seen such hunger for truth."Akbar only replied, "They were starving long before they came here."One morning, as the first pale light touched the high snows, Farid packed his small bundle. He embraced Akbar at the cave mouth, the wind whipping their robes.

"I must return west," he said. "There are scrolls still buried, voices still silent. But I will come back. Your fire has shown me things my stillness could not."Akbar clasped his forearm. "And your wind has tempered our flame. Travel safely, friend."Farid descended the hidden path

and vanished into the white valleys. He left behind no followers divided—only men richer in questions.

With spring stirring in the lower valleys, the mountain itself seemed to open further. The great cave was vast, its tunnels winding deep into the rock like veins in ancient stone. Men explored them carefully, mapping chambers warmed by hidden vents, finding springs that trickled cold and pure. The most loyal settled in permanently. They built low walls of stacked stone to divide living spaces, hung wool curtains for privacy, laid rugs taken from forgotten caravans. Torches burned day and night, their smoke drawn upward by cracks no one could see.Akbar moved his family deeper still, to a broad chamber where the air was steady and the walls smooth. Fatima arranged their few belongings—blankets, a small iron pot, the child's cradle carved from mule-saddle wood. Anara helped, saying little, her hands quick and sure. The boy, now beginning to crawl, laughed at the echoes. Other men claimed their own corners: Baaz and his closest in a side tunnel near the entrance, ready for any alarm; the scribes in a dry alcove where ink would not freeze; the wounded and older near the warmest vents.Akbar no longer spoke every night. Instead, he wrote.By lamplight, he filled sheets of coarse paper—bought dearly from distant traders—with his thoughts. Short teachings, parables drawn from mountain life, explanations of Light and Darkness shaped by blood and survival. His hand was rough, the letters uneven, but the words cut clean.These writings were copied again and again. Trusted riders carried them down secret paths to Kabul, to Ghazni, to villages along the trade roads. In hidden corners of the city—behind shuttered bazaar stalls, in the back rooms of tea houses, under floorboards in loyal homes—the pages passed from hand to hand.No one who received them had met the Black Mullah. Many never would. Yet they read, and pondered, and whispered the words to others.It was said, in the quiet networks beneath the city's noise, that the followers now numbered in the thousands—scattered across valleys and mountains, bound not by sight of the man, but by the truth he had set alight.And deep inside the mountain, in the steady glow of torches, the spark continued to burn.

As the snows began to melt and the high passes opened like reluctant veins, word of the Black Mullah seeped southward, carried on the lips of weary traders and the backs of laden mules. Caravans from Peshawar and beyond, threading through the Khyber's jagged maw, spoke of disrupted routes—ambushed loads of silk and spices, vanished opium bricks, men vanishing into the northern hills. They whispered of a preacher in black robes, gathering outlaws and shepherds into a mountain fortress, teaching a theology twisted from old faiths: Light and Darkness locked in eternal war, the soul a prisoner in flesh, salvation not in prayer but in knowledge and steel. "He calls the world a cage," one merchant muttered over tea in a Kandahar serai, "and bids men break it with their bare hands."These tales reached the ears of sharper listeners. In the bustling depots of Lahore and Delhi, where the British East India Company's banners fluttered like warnings, officers in scarlet coats took note. Major Elias Hawthorne, a gaunt veteran of Burmese campaigns with a scar twisting his lip into a perpetual sneer, read the reports in his tent under oil-lamp glow. "A mullah stirring

sedition in the Afghan wilds?" he scoffed to his aides. "Sounds like a headache, but with heresy thrown in. If he's hitting our trade allies, he's hitting our pockets." Orders were dispatched to a British agent sent northward, blending into caravans with false beard and hidden rupees, tasked to map the rumors, identify the man, and assess the threat.

One such agent, a sly Herati who had sold secrets to the Company for years, rode into Ghulamabad under the guise of a salt trader. He lingered in the village square, ears tuned to the gossip of elders and the boasts of boys. It was there he met Javid, one of Akbar's outer crew—a young rider who ferried messages from the cave to the valleys below. Javid was hungry, his family burdened by debts from a failed harvest. Herati bought him tea, then wine, then slipped silver into his palm. "The Black Mullah's words are fire," Herati murmured, feigning awe. "But fire burns those who carry it too long. The Company pays for embers, not ashes." By week's end, Javid had turned—secretly, or so he thought—whispering details of raid plans, follower numbers. His messages flew south on swift pigeons, inked in code.

Not all probes went unnoticed. Another agent, a burly Sikh named Gurpreet dispatched from Peshawar, pushed too far. He shadowed a supply run near Jalalabad, questioning villagers too bluntly about "the heretic in the mountains." Akbar's men spotted him—rough hands dragged him into a ravine at dusk. Bound and beaten, he held out for a day under the knives of Baaz and Yahya, but torture loosened his tongue: names of officers, routes of caravans, the Company's growing alarm.

"They fear your theology spreads like plague," he gasped through bloodied lips.

"Agents everywhere... watching the passes."

Baaz ended him with a quick slash, leaving the body for jackals.Word of both betrayals reached Akbar swiftly, carried by loyal scouts who had shadowed Javid's meetings and overheard Gurpreet's screams. In the deep chamber where torches flickered against damp walls, Akbar sat with his family—Fatima nursing the boy, Anara mending a cloak—as Baaz delivered the news. The air grew heavy, the child's coos the only sound breaking the silence.

"Javid turned for silver," Baaz said grimly.

"And the Sikh sang of British informants before he stopped breathing."Akbar's eyes darkened, but his voice remained steady.

"The Darkness sends its tendrils. Let them come. We will teach them the cost of reaching into the flame."Outside, the mountain winds howled, carrying echoes of a world closing in.

The decision weighed on Akbar like the mountain itself, but once made, it settled into certainty. In the deep chamber, as torches guttered low, he gathered Baaz, Yahya, and eight of his strongest men. "We strike not for loot alone," he told them, his voice steady as stone.

"We strike to send a message that echoes to Delhi. The foreigners must learn: this land is not theirs to chain. Burn what we cannot carry.

Let the survivors—if any—carry tales of the Black Mullah's fire."Nine days passed in preparation. Scouts shadowed the southern pass, marking the caravan's slow crawl through the valleys. It was a rich one: mules laden with Bengal opium bricks, bolts of shimmering silk, chests of silver rupees bound for Kabul's markets. Guarding it were fifteen British East India Company soldiers—hardened sepoys in red coats, armed with Brown Bess muskets and bayonets, led by a grizzled sergeant named Wilkins who had fought in Burma and now scanned every ridge with wary eyes.

They had been warned in Peshawar: tales of a "Black Mullah" preaching heresy, ambushing trade, gathering fanatics in the hills.

"Capture the devil if you spot him," their officer had barked.

"Alive, if possible. Dead works too."

Akbar's ten men lay in wait at the narrow gorge past Tangi, where sheer cliffs funneled the road into a killing ground. They crouched behind boulders, flintlocks primed, knives sharpened, faces smeared with ash for the shadows. Akbar himself perched on a high ledge, black chadar blending with the rock, watching the dust cloud rise in the distance."Steady," he whispered to Baaz below.

"Wait for the whites of their eyes."

The caravan creaked into view—mules snorting, drivers cursing the steep grade. The soldiers marched in loose formation, muskets slung, one scouting ahead. Wilkins rode at the front, barking orders:

"Eyes sharp, lads! That mullah bastard's out here somewhere. First one spots him gets extra rum!"A sepoy grumbled back, "If he's real, Sarge. Sounds like ghost stories to scare the recruits."

Akbar raised his hand. The signal dropped.The first shot cracked from Yahya's rifle, punching through Wilkins' chest. He toppled from his horse with a gurgling cry.

"Ambush! Form up—"

Chaos erupted. Akbar's men unleashed a volley—flintlocks booming, smoke choking the gorge. Three sepoys fell instantly, heads exploding in sprays of red and bone, limbs twitching as they hit the dirt. The survivors scrambled for cover, returning fire blindly. A bullet whizzed past Akbar, grazing a man's shoulder beside him—blood welled, but he reloaded with a snarl.

"Pour it on!" Baaz roared, charging down with knife drawn.

"For the Light!"

The soldiers fought back fiercely, bayonets fixed. One sepoy bayoneted a rushing attacker, but Yahya hacked him down from behind, blade sinking into his neck with a wet crunch. "You chain the world!" Yahya spat as the man gurgled and collapsed.It was a bloodbath. Akbar's men swarmed like shadows, outflanking the panicked guards. Muskets barked point-blank, shattering skulls—brains and gore splattering rocks. A British officer screamed as his arm was shot off at the elbow, stump spurting; Baaz finished him with a stab to the gut, twisting until the screams stopped. Limbs were hacked in the melee—swords and knives rising and falling, bodies mutilated in the frenzy.

"No mercy for the cage-makers!" one of Akbar's men shouted, stomping a fallen sepoy's face to pulp.

Fifteen red coats lay broken and bleeding, none spared. Akbar's side paid: two wounded—one with a bayonet gash across his thigh, the other clutching a bullet-shattered hand, moaning through gritted teeth.

"Bind them," Akbar ordered calmly, descending the ledge.

"The cave healers will tend you."

The drivers cowered, unharmed. Akbar's men robbed the caravan methodically—silver chests cracked open, opium bricks bundled, silk rolls tied to horses, the beasts themselves led away. What remained—excess crates, papers, trinkets—they piled and torched, flames roaring skyward as a beacon visible for miles.Akbar stood over the pyre, face impassive in the heat.

"Let this burn into their memories," he said to Baaz.

"The cave remains hidden. But our name will travel on the wind."

They vanished into the mountains, spoils heavy on their backs, leaving the gorge a slaughterhouse of hacked limbs and shattered heads—a brutal testament to the foreigners, etched in blood and fire.

Word of the gorge massacre spread like dust on the wind, twisting through valleys and over ridges until it reached the ears of those who had long watched the mountains with wary eyes. The Black Mullah's name, once a whisper among traders, now echoed in the tents of the Ghilzai elders and the fortified compounds of rival Pashtun khans. They heard of the red-coated foreigners slaughtered, heads shattered, limbs hacked, their caravan's riches carried off into hidden caves. But it was not the blood that unsettled them most—it was the man behind it. Akbar was no khan born of ancient bloodlines, no elder bound by the jirga's ancient codes. He answered to no tribal council, paid no tribute to the mullahs of Kabul, and

his followers grew not from kin ties but from words that twisted old faiths into something sharper, stranger.

"He preaches Light and Darkness as equals," one scout reported to his master in a Jalalabad fort.

"Men leave their flocks to join him, carrying rifles and scraps of his writings. He builds no mosques, yet they call him Mullah-e-Siyah."

In the surrounding regions, unease festered like an untended wound. The Ghilzai tribes, fierce guardians of the eastern passes, saw their trade routes threatened—not just by raids, but by the pull of Akbar's message, drawing young warriors away from traditional loyalties. Rival khans in Wardak and Logar whispered of poppy fields now sworn to him, of silver flowing not to family coffers but to mountain stockpiles.

"He is a weed in the garden," grumbled Khan Rahman of the Suleimankhel, his beard streaked with gray, as he paced his mud-walled hall.

"Not of our soil, yet he chokes the roots."

Gathering

It was in the shadow of such murmurs that a secret meeting was called. Under the cover of a moonless night, riders converged on a remote hujra in the hills near Ghazni—a neutral ground, its walls thick with thornbrush to ward off prying eyes. No fires burned outside; inside, a single oil lamp cast flickering light on the faces of twelve men: Ghilzai elders in embroidered vests, Pashtun khans with daggers at their belts, a mullah from Kabul with prayer beads clutched tight. They sat on faded carpets, tea steaming untouched before them, the air heavy with the scent of tobacco and unspoken fear.Elder Malik of the Ghilzai spoke first, his voice gravelly from years of mountain winds.

"This Akbar grows bold. The British dogs he slaughtered were fools, but their empire will bark back. And when they do, it is our lands they will trample. He draws eyes to the hills—eyes we do not need."

Khan Rahman nodded, his fingers drumming on his knee.

"He takes our sons with his devil's words. My nephew rode north last month, muttering of 'sparks in the dark.' Now he guards a cave instead of his father's fields. He is no true mullah—heretic, perhaps. Not bound by Pashtunwali."

The mullah, Imam Khalid, leaned forward, eyes narrowing.

"His teachings mock the Quran. Light and Darkness as gods? Souls trapped in flesh? It spreads like rot. We must cut it out."

Suggestions came slowly, testing the room like thrown stones.

"Negotiate," offered a younger khan, Mirza from Logar, his tone cautious.

"Send envoys. Offer alliance—tribute, perhaps. Bind him to the councils. If he refuses, then we know his ambition."

Rahman snorted.

"Negotiate with a shadow? He will swallow us."

Another elder, grizzled and scarred from old feuds, spoke darkly.

"Hire killers. Quiet blades in the night. Poison in his well. End the weed before it seeds."

The room fell silent, weighing the paths: words or blood. Outside, the wind whispered through the thorns, as if the mountains themselves listened.By dawn, no decision was sealed, but the seeds of action had been sown.

The secret council broke at dawn, scattering riders into the pale light like crows from a carcass. No single path was chosen that night—only possibilities, each man carrying his preferred poison home. But two decisions took root quickly: an offer of negotiation, and, should it fail, a quieter plan for blood.Three weeks later, under a sky heavy with spring rain, four riders approached the lower sentries of Akbar's mountain. They came openly, white cloths tied to their rifles, led by Elder Malik of the Ghilzai himself—his beard oiled, vest embroidered with silver thread, face set in the stern lines of a man who had buried sons and still walked tall. With him rode Mirza, the younger khan who had spoken for talks, and two silent bodyguards whose eyes never rested.Akbar received them in the outer cavern, seated on a simple stone ledge with Baaz and Yahya at his sides, twenty armed followers lining the walls. Torches hissed in the draft. Fatima and Anara watched from a shadowed alcove, the child asleep against his mother's breast.Elder Malik dismounted first, handing his rifle to a sentry without being asked. He greeted Akbar with the traditional embrace, though his eyes held no warmth.

"Peace upon this house," he said formally.

"We come not as enemies, but as brothers of the same soil."

Akbar inclined his head.

"And peace upon you, Elder. Sit. Tea will be brought."

They sat on rugs spread for the occasion. Fatima poured silently, her movements graceful, then withdrew. Malik drank, wiped his beard, and spoke plainly.

"You have grown strong, Akbarkhan—once a farmer's son, now called Mullah by many. Your raids strike the foreigner, and for that some cheer quietly. But your words... they unsettle the old ways. Young men leave their tribes, their jirgas, their blood debts. You answer to no council. This cannot stand forever. The khans and elders offer alliance: join us. Bring your men under the tribal banners. Share your strength, and we share ours. Tribute routes, protected fields, a voice in the great jirga. Refuse, and you stand alone when the storms come—British, Shah's soldiers, or our own."

Mirza leaned forward, voice smoother.

"We do not ask you to silence your teachings, only to bind them to the land that birthed us all. Pashtunwali is older than any book. Honor it, and we honor you."

Akbar listened without expression, fingers resting lightly on the black book at his side. When they finished, the cavern was silent save for the drip of water in distant tunnels.At last he spoke, voice low but carrying.

"I honor the soil that fed my father, Elder. I honor the blood that flows in these mountains. But the councils you speak of—do they free men from chains, or forge new ones? Your jirgas bargain with the British one season, fight them the next, then bargain again. You protect poppy fields for foreign silver, tax the poor until they sell daughters. I do not stand above the tribes—I stand apart because the tribes kneel too easily."

Malik's face hardened. "Careful, boy. Pride breaks before it bends." Akbar met his gaze steadily.

"I offer no insult. Only truth. My men follow because they choose, not because blood binds them. Join us if you seek Light. But I will not kneel to councils that serve Darkness in the name of tradition."

The air grew thick. Mirza glanced at Malik, unease flickering in his eyes.Malik rose slowly.

"Then you choose the hard path. May Allah guide you—or break you."

They left as they came, white cloths still tied, but the peace felt brittle as thin ice. That night, in a fortified qala far to the south, Khan Rahman listened to Malik's report over roasted lamb and sharp wine. When the elder finished, Rahman slammed his fist on the low table.

"I warned you—negotiation with a dog gets you bitten. He refuses the hand extended, insults the old ways. Now we end it."

Malik sighed.

"He is strong. Many follow him." Rahman smiled coldly.

"Strength draws blades as well as followers. Gold speaks louder than pride. There are men who kill for less than I will pay—and men inside his cave greedy enough to open a gate."

In the shadows of the qala, plans shifted from words to steel. The tribal storm began to gather.

Khan Rahman did not wait long. Gold moved faster than riders, and greed was a quieter messenger than pride. In the weeks following the failed negotiation, his agents fanned out—discreet men with soft voices and heavy purses—seeking cracks in the Black Mullah's mountain.They found one in a follower named Sherin, a Ghilzai cousin distantly related to Elder Malik's clan. Sherin had joined Akbar early, drawn by the words of Light and the promise of purpose, but time in the cave had worn him thin. His wife had died in childbirth the previous winter, his only son taken by fever soon after. The raids brought silver, but silver did not fill empty nights. When Rahman's agent approached him during a supply run to a lower village—slipping beside him at a tea house, speaking of family honor and a purse heavy enough to buy land and a new wife—Sherin listened.

"Only information," the agent murmured. "The cave's hidden entrances. Patrol times. When the Mullah sleeps deepest. No blood on your hands."

Sherin took the first purse. Then the second. He began feeding scraps: the eastern tunnel rarely guarded at dawn, the shift change at the goat pen, the chamber where Akbar kept his family. He told himself it was to force a peace, to bring the heretic to heel without war. But the gold weighed heavier than conscience.The ambush was planned for a night when the moon hid behind thick clouds. Twenty killers—hard men hired from Logar and Wardak, loyal to Rahman's coin—gathered in a ravine two hours' ride from the mountain. They carried jezails and curved knives, faces blackened with soot. Sherin would guide them to a side fissure he claimed only he knew, leading straight to the inner tunnels.At midnight, they moved—silent as wolves, boots wrapped in cloth. Sherin led, heart pounding, the final purse tucked inside his vest. The fissure loomed, narrow and dark, just as he had described.They never saw the trap.Akbar had suspected betrayal since the envoys left. Baaz had watched Sherin too closely, noted the new silver ring on his finger, the way his eyes darted during council. When Sherin slipped away that evening pretending to check snares, a loyal boy followed and returned with word.Akbar did not rage. He simply positioned his best men—Yahya and ten others—in the rocks above the fissure, flintlocks primed, knives ready.The first killer stepped into the narrow passage. A single shot cracked the night. He fell without a sound, throat opened by Yahya's blade before he hit the ground.Then the storm broke.Akbar's men fired from above, bullets ricocheting off stone, tearing into flesh. Screams echoed as bodies piled in the tight space—three dead in the first volley, limbs twisted, blood slick on the rocks. The hired killers fired blindly upward, powder smoke choking the air. One charged with a roar, only to meet Baaz's knife in the dark—gutted and left gasping.

"For the Darkness you serve!" Baaz snarled as another fell.

Sherin tried to flee, stumbling over corpses. Yahya caught him by the collar, dragging him into the torchlight of the waiting men.Akbar stepped forward, face calm in the flickering glow.

"You sold the Light for gold," he said quietly.

Sherin wept, babbling of family, of pressure.

"They would have killed my kin—"

"Your kin will learn what betrayal costs."

They did not kill him quickly. Sherin's screams carried far that night, a warning etched in pain. When it ended, his body was left at the ravine's edge—throat cut, purse of gold nailed to his chest—for Rahman's scouts to find.By morning, the mountain stood untouched, its secrets intact. But the tribal storm had drawn first blood, and the reply would not be long in coming.

The discovery of Sherin's mutilated body sent a chill through the tribal networks that gold could not warm. Khan Rahman received the news in his qala at dusk, a rider stumbling into the courtyard with the tale: twenty hired killers dead in a rock-choked ravine, throats cut, bodies riddled with bullets, and the traitor Sherin nailed like a warning skin, gold coins hammered into his lifeless chest.Rahman flew into a rage, shattering a clay cup against the wall.

"He mocks us!" he roared to his gathered kinsmen.

"This dog from the dirt thinks he can spill Pashtun blood and hang our shame for the crows!"

Elder Malik, summoned hastily, sat grim-faced across the fire.

"I warned that negotiation would fail. But this... he knew. Someone inside still whispers to him, or his eyes are sharper than we thought."

The room murmured agreement. Younger warriors gripped their rifles, eyes burning for revenge. Rahman's own son, Torjan—a hot-blooded youth with a fresh beard and old grudges—leaned forward.

"Father, let us gather the clans. Five hundred men. We burn the mountain until he crawls out choking."

Malik shook his head slowly.

"Five hundred would leave trails the British could follow. And half would join him on the march when they hear his tongue. No. We strike clever. Blood feud is declared—badal for the dead. Every clan owes it now. His followers in the villages will be hunted. Their families shamed. Wells poisoned. Goats scattered. We choke him slowly, until even his loyal dogs turn from hunger."

Rahman nodded, the rage cooling into calculation.

"And the cave? We find it. More gold. More ears inside. When the moment ripens, we strike the head."

In the weeks that followed, the tribal revenge began its slow grind. Riders harassed Akbar's supply runners, ambushing lone men on valley paths and leaving their bodies as warnings. Villages that once traded quietly with the mountain found their granaries burned at night, elders beaten for "harboring heretics." A cousin of Yahya was dragged from his home in Ghulamabad and flogged in the square, accused of carrying messages. Whispers turned to open curses: the Black Mullah was a curse on the tribes, a breaker of Pashtunwali, a man who placed strange books above blood.In the mountain, Akbar felt the pressure tighten like a noose. Scouts returned with grim reports: patrols doubled, hidden poppy patches trampled, loyal families fleeing south. One night, Baaz brought a captured tribesman—bound and bruised—who spat defiance even under the knife.

"Rahman has sworn badal," the man gasped.

"Every khan joins. You will die alone, heretic."

Akbar looked down at him calmly.

"Alone? The Darkness has many hands, but the Light needs only one spark."

They released the man alive—minus an ear—to carry the message back.That evening, Akbar gathered his closest in the deep chamber. Fatima rocked the child by the torchlight, her face drawn but steady. Anara sharpened a small blade, eyes on her brother.

"They come for us now," Baaz said.

"Not with armies yet, but with a thousand cuts."Akbar nodded, placing a hand on the black book.

"Good. Let them bleed the tribes first—hunting shadows, burning their own kin in suspicion. When they tire, we will show them what fire truly costs."He looked to Yahya.

"Double the sentries. Move the poppy deeper. And prepare the riders—we will remind them that revenge cuts both ways."

Outside, the wind howled through the peaks, carrying the distant howl of wolves. The tribal storm had broken, but the mountain stood firm, its heart burning brighter in the gathering dark.

The tribal revenge did not come in a single storm but in relentless waves, like sand eroding stone. Khan Rahman's men struck first at the fringes—raiding a hidden supply cache in a lower valley, killing three of Akbar's scouts in the process. The bodies were left strung from thorn trees, eyes pecked by crows, a message carved into their chests:

"Heretics reap what they sow."

Akbar received the news in the central cavern, his followers gathered around the fire, faces hardened by torchlight. Baaz paced, fist clenched around his knife hilt.

"They think us weak because we hide in rock," he growled.

"Let me take twenty men. We'll burn Rahman's qala to ash."

Akbar sat unmoving, the black book open on his knee.

"Weak? They strike at shadows because they fear the flame. But yes—answer them. Not with fire alone, but with precision. Take the men. Hit their patrols, their outlying farms. Leave survivors to carry the tale: the Light does not forgive those who chain it."

That night, Baaz led the raid under cover of storm clouds. They descended on a Suleimankhel outpost near Wardak—a cluster of mud huts guarding a vital well. Akbar's men moved like ghosts, knives flashing in the rain. Six tribesmen died quickly—throats slit in sleep, bodies dragged into the mud. Two were spared, bound and branded on the forearm with a heated blade: a simple circle, symbolizing the trapped spark.

"Tell Rahman," Baaz whispered to one as he cut the ropes, "the Darkness you serve will consume you first."

The branded men fled, spreading word of the "heretic's mark." Panic rippled through the clans. Elders doubled guards, sons slept with rifles loaded. But Akbar's retaliation only fueled the fire.Elder Malik, sensing the feud's spiral, called another council—this time in his own fortified village, walls patrolled by fifty armed kin. Khan Rahman arrived with Torjan and thirty warriors, their jezails gleaming. Imam Khalid joined, prayer beads clicking nervously.

"We have lost eight already," Malik said, voice steady but eyes weary.

"His men strike like vipers—gone before we wake. Negotiation failed; betrayal failed. Now we must crush him openly. Gather the lashkar—two hundred from the Ghilzai, a hundred from Logar and Wardak. We march on the mountain."Rahman slammed his palm on the table.

"Yes! Burn the caves. Hang his followers from the peaks."

Mirza, the younger khan, spoke cautiously.

"A full lashkar will draw the Shah's eyes—or worse, the British. And if we fail, our clans weaken for nothing. Send smaller bands first—wear him down."

Torjan sneered. "Coward's talk. Father, give me fifty. I'll bring you his head."

The council agreed to a compromise: waves of ambushes to probe the mountain's defenses, then a unified strike. Rahman pledged gold for more rifles; Malik offered scouts familiar with the passes.As they dispersed, Imam Khalid muttered a prayer.

"Allah protect us from this shadow."

In the mountain, Akbar prepared. He sent riders to call more followers—outlaws from the east, disillusioned shepherds from the south. His numbers swelled to over a hundred, drilling in the tunnels by day, studying his writings by night.

"They come for our flesh," he told them one evening, "but they cannot touch the Light within."

The first clash came soon after—a tribal ambush on Akbar's foraging party in a narrow defile. Fifteen of Rahman's men against ten of Akbar's. Gunfire echoed off the cliffs, bodies falling in the dust. Akbar lost two, but his men killed seven, dragging the survivors back for questioning.The feud deepened, blood soaking the soil, each side tallying losses like debts. But Akbar's clan, bound by purpose rather than blood, held firm—growing sharper with every cut.

The tribal lashkar gathered slowly, like storm clouds building over the peaks. Khan Rahman and Elder Malik rode at its head, two hundred and fifty men strong—Ghilzai riders in chainmail vests, Logar warriors with jezails slung across their backs, Wardak clansmen waving banners of green and black. Torjan, Rahman's son, galloped ahead, shouting boasts that echoed down the valleys: "Today the heretic dies! His cave will be his grave!"

Scouts had finally pinpointed a weakness—an exposed ridge trail leading to one of the mountain's side entrances, used for goat herding and supply runs. The plan was simple: overwhelm the outer guards, force the fissure, and flood the tunnels with numbers.Akbar knew they were coming. Loyal villagers, fearing the lashkar's wrath, sent warning through hidden runners. In the great cavern, he addressed his men—now nearly a hundred and fifty, hardened by months of skirmishes, their eyes bright with the conviction of his teachings.

"They come with blood in their hearts," Akbar said, standing tall in his black chadar, the child on Fatima's hip watching silently from the side.

"They fight for old chains—clan, gold, pride. We fight for the spark that refuses to die. Hold the ridge. Bleed them there. When they break, we will show the tribes what true strength looks like."

Baaz and Yahya led the defense, forty men positioned along the Broken Ridge—a jagged spine of rock overlooking the trail, perfect for ambush. The rest guarded the tunnels, ready to fall back if needed.The lashkar attacked at dawn, drums beating, horses thundering up the slope. Torjan charged first, rifle raised, screaming, "For Pashtunwali!"

Akbar's men waited until the front ranks were committed, then unleashed hell.The ridge erupted in gunfire—jezails and flintlocks cracking in disciplined volleys. The first wave crumpled: horses rearing, riders tumbling with shattered chests and limbs. Torjan took a bullet through the shoulder, spinning from his saddle with a howl.

"Forward!" Rahman bellowed from the rear, but the trail narrowed into a killing bottle—bodies piling, blocking the advance.Yahya led a counter-charge down the flank, knives flashing as they hit the disorganized tribesmen.

"The Light burns!" he roared, slashing through a Ghilzai warrior's guard, blade sinking deep. Blood sprayed the rocks; screams mixed with the acrid smoke of powder.The battle raged for hours. Akbar's men fought with fanatical cohesion—covering each other, reloading in turns, using the terrain like extensions of their bodies. The tribesmen, brave but fractured by clan rivalries, faltered when the losses mounted. Thirty dead in the first hour, then fifty—sons and cousins falling under precise fire, bodies hacked in the melee. Rahman tried to rally them, riding forward himself.

"Cowards! Push!"

But a bullet from Baaz's jezail caught him in the throat. He clutched the wound, eyes wide in shock, before toppling into the dust. Torjan, wounded but raging, dragged his father's body behind a rock.

"Retreat!" he finally screamed, voice breaking as the lashkar crumbled. They fled, leaving over eighty dead on the ridge—elders among them, including two of Malik's closest kin. Akbar lost twelve men, their bodies carried back into the cave for burial in hidden crevices.That night, as Fatima bound wounds and Anara boiled broth for the weary, Akbar stood at the ridge's edge, looking down at the scattered tribal banners.

"They will come again," Baaz said, wiping blood from his blade. Akbar nodded.

"And again. Until they learn—or break."

The blood feud had claimed its first great harvest, but the mountain stood stronger, its defenders forged in victory. Word of Rahman's death spread like wildfire: the Black Mullah could not be crushed by numbers alone.

Rahman's death shattered the tribal alliance like a jezail bullet through clay. Torjan, now khan in his father's place, swore badal over the body in the qala courtyard, his shoulder bound but his voice raw with fury.

"My father will have blood for blood!" he roared to the gathered warriors.

"Every Ghilzai, every Suleimankhel—ride! We burn their villages, poison their wells, until the heretic chokes on his own mountain!"

The lashkar reformed, angrier, less disciplined—nearly three hundred men, fueled by grief and gold from Rahman's hidden chests. Elder Malik tried to temper the storm, urging caution, but Torjan overrode him.

"Caution killed my father! We strike the heart—through Wardak, where his followers graze hidden flocks."

They marched on a cluster of loyal villages in the Wardak lowlands, homes of men who had quietly sent sons or grain to the mountain. At dawn, the tribesmen descended: torches thrown onto thatched roofs, shots ringing as families fled. Twenty villagers died—old men cut down at wells, boys shot in the fields. Goats were slaughtered, granaries fired.

"This is the price of heresy!" Torjan shouted, riding through the smoke.

But Akbar had foreseen the widening war. Scouts brought word days earlier. He sent Baaz with fifty men—not to defend the villages directly, but to strike the attackers' rear.As Torjan's lashkar reveled in the burning Wardak hamlets, Baaz's force hit their supply train in a narrow pass: pack mules laden with powder and grain. The ambush was swift and merciless. Jezails cracked from the heights, dropping guards before they could mount.

Baaz led the charge down, knife in hand. "For the spark they try to extinguish!"

The tribesmen fought back fiercely, but surprise turned the tide. Thirty of Torjan's men fell —hacked and shot in the chaos, bodies trampled under panicked horses. Baaz's raiders seized the supplies, torched the rest, and vanished into the hills, losing only eight.Torjan arrived too late, staring at the carnage.

"They knew," he snarled to Malik, who had ridden with the lashkar.

"Someone warns them still."Malik's face was ashen.

"This feud devours us. Rahman gone, villages ash, men bleeding for a cave hard to find. Perhaps Mirza was right—peace before we all—"

"Peace?" Torjan spat. "With a dog who kills khans? No. We gather more. From every clan. Five hundred next time."

But cracks were showing. Whispers spread among the younger warriors: the Black Mullah's men fought like demons possessed, never breaking, always knowing. Some clans hesitated to send sons, fearing the mountain's curse.In the cave that night, Akbar buried his eight dead in a hidden chamber, speaking words from his book over their wrapped bodies. Fatima stood beside him, the child clutching her veil.

"They widen the war," Baaz reported, blood still on his sleeve.

"But each strike costs them more."Akbar nodded, eyes on the flames.

"Good. The Darkness feeds on itself. We endure—and grow."

His followers now numbered over two hundred, new men trickling in from burned villages, drawn by tales of unbreakable defense. The feud raged on, but the tribes were learning: the mountain did not yield.

Torjan's grief turned to obsession. With Rahman buried and the Suleimankhel clans howling for vengeance, he refused Elder Malik's pleas for restraint.

"We have bled enough waiting," he declared in the smoke-filled hujra, his wounded shoulder still slung but his eyes wild.

"No more grand charges. We strike like shadows—small bands, night raids, poison in their streams. Cut the serpent's belly until it crawls out to die."

He sent six groups of twenty—silent killers, veterans of old feuds—slipping through the passes under cover of darkness. Their targets: the hidden poppy fields in sheltered crevices, the goat trails where Akbar's men foraged, the springs that fed the cave.The first raid hit a high meadow where a dozen of Akbar's followers tended a secret crop. The tribesmen came at moonset, knives drawn, throats slit before alarms could sound. Eight died in their bedrolls, the poppies trampled and burned. Only two escaped, wounded, to stagger back with the tale. Akbar heard the report at dawn, his face unreadable as Baaz recounted the losses. Yahya cursed, slamming his fist against the stone wall.

"They fight dirty now—like cowards!"

"No," Akbar said quietly, standing with the black book in hand.

"They fight desperate. Desperation is the Darkness gnawing its own tail. But we answer in kind."

He dispatched his own night raiders—thirty of his fiercest, led by Yahya. They struck three tribal camps in one bloody week: a Suleimankhel outpost near Logar, a Ghilzai supply tent in the plains, a well-guarded herd belonging to Torjan's closest cousin.Yahya's men moved like vengeance itself. In the first camp, they slit sentries' throats and fired the tents, shooting down fleeing warriors in the firelight. Twelve dead. In the second, they poisoned the water

barrels with nightshade before vanishing—fifteen tribesmen writhing by morning. The third raid was the cruelest: Torjan's cousin caught alone on the trail, dragged into the rocks, tortured for hours to reveal plans before his throat was cut.The tribes reeled. Twenty-eight dead in a single week, including two minor elders and Torjan's own blood kin. Whispers turned to outright fear: the Black Mullah's men were everywhere and nowhere, striking without warning, leaving branded bodies or none at all.Torjan raged in his qala, smashing furniture as Malik watched grimly.

"He turns our own ways against us! How many more must die?"Malik's voice was heavy.

"Too many already. The young men falter—some clans withhold fighters, saying the feud is cursed. Mirza speaks sense: this war feeds only the mountain."

But Torjan would not hear it.

"Then we pay more. Hire from the Waziri—fierce dogs who fear no curse. Five bands this time. We will drown him in blood."

In the cave, Akbar buried his eight from the poppy raid, speaking over their graves: "They died guarding the spark. Their Light returns to the source—stronger."

His followers, though grieving, grew more resolute. New arrivals swelled their ranks—men fleeing tribal vengeance, drawn by tales of unbreakable defense. Losses mounted on both sides, but Akbar's core held, tempered like steel in fire.The night of knives had only begun, and the mountains drank deep.

Torjan's call for Waziri mercenaries spread like a plague wind. Gold from Rahman's remaining chests bought fifty fierce fighters from the western hills—men with scarred faces and long jezails, loyal only to coin and the promise of plunder. They arrived under a sullen sky, their leader, a one-eyed giant named Gulzar, clasping Torjan's forearm in the qala courtyard.

"We fight for silver," Gulzar rumbled, "but we do not die for ghosts. Your heretic—he is flesh?"

Torjan's eyes blazed.

"Flesh that bleeds. Strike his foraging parties, burn his hidden fields. When he emerges, we crush him."

Elder Malik watched the exchange with growing dread. He pulled Torjan aside that night. "These Waziri are wolves. When the gold runs thin, they turn on the hand that feeds. And our own clans tire—sons dead, fields untended. Mirza refuses more men, saying the feud poisons the tribes."

Torjan shrugged off the warning.

"Let Mirza hide. With the Waziri, we end this before winter."

The first Waziri raid struck hard: thirty mercenaries ambushing a twenty-man party of Akbar's followers returning from a salt run in the lowlands. The clash was brutal in a dusty ravine—jezails booming, knives clashing in the haze. The Waziri fought with savage joy, hacking limbs and crushing skulls. Twelve of Akbar's men fell, their bodies stripped and left for vultures.But Akbar's survivors fought like men possessed. They dragged the wounded to cover, returning fire until the Waziri withdrew with eight dead, Gulzar cursing the "demon heretics" who refused to break.Word of the heavy cost reached the cave swiftly. In the torchlit chamber, Akbar listened to the report, Fatima binding a survivor's gashed arm nearby.

"They buy wolves now," Baaz said grimly. "Waziri do not stop for honor."

Akbar's voice was calm. "Wolves can be hunted. Yahya—take forty. Find their camp. Strike at dawn, when they sleep off the kill."

Yahya's raid was a masterpiece of vengeance. Slipping through the darkness, they fell on the Waziri encampment in a sheltered valley. Sentries died silently, throats opened. Then the slaughter: tents fired, sleeping men shot or stabbed as they stumbled out. Gulzar fought like a bear, killing three before a bullet shattered his knee; Yahya finished him with a blade to the heart.Twenty-two Waziri dead, the rest scattering into the hills, leaderless and unpaid. Torjan received the news at midnight, a bloodied survivor collapsing in his courtyard.

"They came from the rock itself," the man gasped. "Like djinn. Gulzar is gone. The gold—"

Torjan struck him silent, face pale with rage. In the following days, clans began pulling back—men needed for harvest, fear gnawing at resolve. Malik's warnings echoed louder.In the mountain, Akbar buried his twelve, his followers chanting words from the black book. Losses mounted—now nearing thirty in the feud's grind—but new men arrived daily, drawn by tales of unbreakable victory. The tribes' bargain with wolves had cost them dearly, and the storm showed no sign of breaking.

Winter loosened its grip, and the feud entered its bloodiest season. Torjan, half-mad with loss, threw the last of his father's gold into the fire—hiring more fighters, pressing reluctant clans, declaring every man who did not ride against the Black Mullah an enemy of the tribes.

"No mercy for collaborators," he decreed, and his riders enforced it: villages that once traded with the mountain found doors kicked in at night, fathers and sons dragged out and shot in the fields.The largest battle yet came in the spring thaw, when Torjan and the remaining elders mustered four hundred men—a true lashkar now, banners from a dozen clans—for a direct assault on what scouts swore was the mountain's main approach: a wide valley leading to a false cave entrance Akbar had deliberately left lightly guarded as bait.

Akbar was ready. He had pulled his people deeper, turning the valley into a trap. One hundred and eighty of his followers waited—dug into the slopes, behind rock walls, flintlocks loaded, knives sharpened.

"They come to end us," he told them the night before, his voice echoing in the great cavern.

"Let them break on the truth."

The lashkar charged at midday, Torjan at the front, screaming his father's name. Akbar's men held fire until the tribesmen filled the valley floor—then unleashed a storm of lead. The front ranks fell like wheat under the scythe: horses screaming, riders tumbling with shattered chests and limbs. Torjan pressed on, jezail blazing, killing two of Akbar's forward scouts before a bullet took his horse.The melee that followed was chaos. Yahya led a flanking charge down the left slope, Baaz the right—Akbar's men crashing into the disorganized tribesmen like a hammer on glass. Knives rose and fell; shots rang at point-blank range.

Elder Malik fought in the center, sword drawn, cutting down a young follower before Baaz's blade found his side, twisting deep. Malik sank to his knees, blood bubbling, eyes wide as he recognized the end.Torjan, on foot now, roared through the press, hacking wildly. He reached Yahya, blades clashing in a frenzy—Torjan's strength against Yahya's speed. A slash opened Yahya's arm, but Yahya drove his knife into Torjan's thigh, then throat. The young khan fell choking, fingers clawing the dirt.The lashkar broke. Panic spread as elders and khans dropped—six dead in the valley's heart, including Malik and two of his sons. Over a

hundred tribesmen lay dead or dying when the remnants fled, trampling their own wounded in terror.Akbar lost twenty-two—brave men carried back into the tunnels, buried with words from the black book. His followers mourned, but the victory was undeniable: the great lashkar shattered, its leaders gutted.In the following weeks, the tribes reeled. Clans withdrew, refusing Torjan's successors' calls. Funerals stretched across valleys—fathers burying sons, widows wailing over empty compounds. Nearly a hundred and fifty tribal men had fallen since the feud's spark, elders and heirs chief among them.Akbar's losses reached forty, each grave a weight—but his clan stood stronger, swollen by defectors from broken tribes, men who saw in the mountain's unbroken stand a power greater than bloodlines.The feud's fire burned low, its fuel spent. Whispers of peace began to rise, carried on the wind to Mirza's ears.

The valley battle left the tribes hollowed. Funerals stretched for days—long lines of shrouded bodies carried on mules, women keening from compound rooftops, mullahs reciting prayers over graves dug in exhausted soil. Elder Malik was buried with his sword; Torjan beside his father Rahman, their bloodline severed in a single afternoon. Of the old council that had first gathered against Akbar, only scattered survivors remained, their voices drowned in grief.No new lashkar formed. The clans that had pledged hundreds now sent excuses: harvests needed tending, British tax collectors prowled the roads, winter stores were thin. Younger warriors, once eager for glory, spoke quietly in the hujras.

"We charged with four hundred and fled from less than half that number. They do not break. They do not tire. Perhaps the Black Mullah truly carries something we do not understand."

Mirza of Logar, who had long urged caution, watched the unraveling from his fortified village. He had withheld his best men from the final battle, preserving his clan's strength while others bled. Now riders came to him daily—widows seeking justice, minor khans asking protection, elders begging an end.

"The feud has eaten our future," one old Ghilzai told him, beard trembling.

"Sons gone, fields fallow, gold spent on graves. If we continue, the tribes themselves will crack."

Mirza listened, weighing the shift. Akbar's mountain had not fallen; instead, it loomed larger, its silence more ominous than any raid. Stories filtered down: new followers arriving weekly, hidden fields blooming richer than before, the Black Mullah's writings copied in secret across villages. Men who once cursed him now read the pages in hidden corners, pondering the war of Light and Darkness.In the cave, the cost was carved deep. Akbar's losses had reached forty-eight—names etched into the tunnel walls, their families fed from communal stores. Fatima moved among the wounded, her hands steady as she changed dressings, the child now toddling at her skirts. Anara, quieter than ever, helped bury the latest dead, her face lined with the weight of endless war. One night, Akbar gathered his

remaining leaders—Baaz, Yahya, and the inner circle—in the deep chamber. Torchlight flickered over weary faces.

"They bleed faster than we do," Baaz said, voice rough. "But we are not untouched. Another great battle and we may not hold the outer ridges."

Yahya nodded. "The tribes fracture. No new banners come."

Akbar sat with the black book closed on his lap, staring into the fire. "The Darkness has devoured its own servants. Rahman, Malik, Torjan—all gone. Their chains break with them. We have endured. The spark burns brighter for the blood spilled upon it."

He paused, then added softly, "But endurance is not victory if it leaves only ashes. If they seek peace now, we will hear it—not from weakness, but from strength."

Scouts reported movement days later: a small party under white banners approaching the lower sentries. Mirza's colors.The mountain waited, rifles ready, but no shots fired. The storm had spent itself, leaving only the question of what would rise from the ruins.

The white banners appeared first on a ridge two miles below the main sentries—three riders, no weapons drawn, colors tied high on lances. Akbar's outer guards watched them for a full day, jezails trained, waiting for trickery. When the riders did not advance but simply waited, a message was sent deeper into the mountain.Akbar received the report in the great cavern, surrounded by his inner circle. Baaz read the description aloud: "The lead rider is Mirza of Logar. He asks safe passage for talk. Alone, or with two guards. No others."

Yahya snorted. "Mirza—the one who held back his men while the others bled. Now he comes sniffing for peace when the tribes are broken."

Baaz nodded. "A trap? He could bring hidden killers."

Akbar stood silently for a long moment, the black book tucked under his arm, torchlight flickering across his scarred face. Fatima watched from the side chamber doorway, the child asleep against her shoulder.

"No," Akbar said finally. "He comes because he sees the end. The tribes have no more sons to spend. Let him enter. Three guards only, searched at the outer fissure. Bring him to the central chamber. We will hear what the survivor has to say."

Half an hour later, Mirza rode up the hidden trail under heavy escort—Yahya's men flanking him, hands never far from triggers. He dismounted in the outer cavern, handing over his jezail and knife without protest. His face was leaner than before, eyes ringed with the weariness of a man who had buried allies.

They led him deeper, through torchlit tunnels where followers lined the walls—silent, watchful, rifles slung but ready. Mirza's gaze took it in: the ordered defenses, the quiet

discipline, the absence of fear. No boasts, no jeers. Only the weight of eyes that had seen victory.In the central chamber, Akbar waited on a simple stone seat, Baaz and Yahya at his sides. A low fire burned; rugs were spread for the guest. Fatima poured tea, then withdrew.Mirza greeted with the full salute—hand to heart, head bowed.

"Peace upon this house, Akbarkhan. Or do they call you Mullah-e-Siyah now?"

Akbar inclined his head. "Names are chains men forge. Sit. You have ridden far under white. Speak your purpose."

Mirza drank the tea, gathering his words."The tribes are finished," he said bluntly. "Rahman dead. Malik dead. Torjan and his brothers dead. A hundred and fifty graves filled by your hand—or near enough. Clans shattered, widows without sons, fields untended. I held back my men not from cowardice, but foresight. Now the others come to me, begging an end."

He leaned forward, voice low."I offer peace. Not submission—peace. Your teachings... they are strange to us. Light and Darkness as you speak them, sparks in flesh, knowledge over blood. We do not understand, and many fear. But you have proven stronger than the old ways. Let your followers be a separate sect. Keep to the mountain. Trade quietly if you wish, but no more raids on tribal herds or wells. We close our eyes to your words, ask no tribute, demand no kneeling. In return, the feud dies. No more blood for blood."

The chamber was silent. Baaz's hand tightened on his knife; Yahya's eyes narrowed. Akbar studied Mirza for a long moment, the fire crackling between them.

"And if we refuse?" he asked quietly.

Mirza met his gaze steadily. "Then the war grinds on, and more graves open. But you know the tribes have no stomach left. It would be slow—poison, ambush, betrayal. Years, perhaps. Until one side breaks."

Akbar set his tea aside."You offer what we have already won," he said.

"The tribes broken, the old councils dust. But peace... peace allows the spark to burn without devouring all."

He rose, extending his hand."Peace, then. On your terms—with one addition. No man is hunted for reading our words. The teachings spread as they will. The Light finds its own."

Mirza clasped the forearm firmly, relief flickering in his eyes.

"Agreed. The teachings are wind—we cannot cage wind."

The white banner had done its work. The feud's long night began to lift.

The peace with Mirza held, fragile at first like thin ice over a deep stream, but it held. No riders crossed the invisible boundaries with rifles raised. Tribal caravans skirted the

mountain's shadow, elders averted their eyes when the name Black Mullah was spoken, and the feud's scars slowly scabbed over. Villages rebuilt granaries, widows remarried, and the graves of a hundred and fifty tribesmen settled into the earth.In the mountain, Akbar did not rest. With the constant threat lifted, the great cave transformed. Tunnels were widened, chambers lit by captured British lanterns burning smuggled oil. Hidden vents drew smoke upward; springs were channeled into stone basins. The followers—now over three hundred—lived in ordered sections: families in the deeper warm halls, warriors near the entrances, scribes in dry alcoves where ink pots never froze.Akbar moved his own quarters even farther in, to a vast natural dome where a trickle of water fell like silver thread from the ceiling. Here he built a simple home: rugs from raided caravans, a low wooden table carved by Yahya, shelves for his growing library of writings.

Trade resumed, careful and quiet. Mirza's men turned blind eyes as Akbar's riders guided small caravans through secret passes, taxing opium and silk bound for India, sharing a portion with Logar clans to keep the peace sweet. Silver flowed in; weapons, grain, and cloth flowed out. The mountain became self-sufficient, its poppy fields terraced in hidden crevices blooming richer than ever.Akbar spent long nights writing. The black book had grown thick with additions—parables of the feud, lessons drawn from blood and victory, explanations of how the tribes' Darkness had devoured itself while the Light endured. Scribes copied furiously; riders carried sealed pages to underground networks in Kabul, Ghazni, even as far as Herat. Followers who had never seen the mountain read by candlelight, whispering of the spark trapped in flesh, of knowledge as the only true salvation. Baaz married a follower's widow, fathering a son he trained from infancy with knife and jezail. Yahya, scarred deeper now, took to teaching the young—drills at dawn, stories of the great battles at dusk. The sect had no name yet, but men began calling themselves "Seekers of the Hidden Flame," bound not by tribe or blood but by the words that had outlasted steel.One evening, as spring returned for the third year of peace, Akbar stood at a high vent overlooking the valleys. Mirza's lands lay green below, smoke rising peacefully from compounds that once sent killers. Baaz joined him, older now, beard streaked with gray.

"They fear us still," Baaz said. "But they leave us be."

Akbar nodded. "Fear is a chain. One day it will break, and they will come—not with rifles, but with questions."

Below, in the great cavern, followers gathered for the evening reading. Akbar's voice would soon echo through the tunnels, steady as the mountain itself.The feud was over.

The Light

Years had passed since the peace with Mirza, and the mountain had become a world unto itself—a living testament to the teachings that had outlasted blood and blade. Akbar's followers now numbered in the thousands, scattered not just in the caves but in hidden enclaves across the valleys, where the words of Light and Darkness were whispered over hearths and copied onto hides by lamplight. The British had probed the edges once or twice, sending scouts who vanished in the passes, their reports dismissed as tales of ghosts. The tribes kept their distance, their old wounds scabbed over with uneasy respect. Victory had settled like dust on Akbar's shoulders, heavy and unyielding.But victory, he had come to learn, was a hollow vessel. It echoed with the voices of the dead—the tribal elders and sons felled in the feud, the followers buried in the tunnels, their sparks released too soon. Akbar walked the chambers less now, his once-commanding presence quieter, his black chadar hanging looser on a frame worn by time. Fatima noticed it first, in the way his hands lingered on the pages of the ancient book, his eyes distant as if searching for something beyond the stone walls.The illness came swiftly, a fever that swept through the lower tunnels like a thief in the night. It took the weak first—the elders, a few children. Akbar's son, now a boy of eight with his father's sharp gaze and his mother's quiet strength, fought longest. He burned for days, his small body twisting under sweat-soaked blankets, whispering fragments of the teachings between labored breaths.

"The spark... trapped... Father, does it hurt to escape?"Akbar sat beside him, hand on the boy's forehead, murmuring words from the book.

"The pain is the chain breaking, my son. Hold to the Light within."

But the fever did not break. One dawn, as the first pale glow filtered through the vents, the boy's chest rose once, then stilled. Fatima's wail echoed through the mountain, raw and unending. The burial was simple, in a chamber deep where the air was cool and still. Akbar wrapped the body himself, placing a small copy of the teachings in the boy's hands. Followers gathered, murmuring prayers of release, but Akbar spoke no words. He watched the stone seal the grave, his face a mask, but inside, something cracked.That night, he withdrew. Without announcement, he gathered the black book, a single torch, and a blanket, descending into the deepest tunnels—passages unexplored even by his most loyal, where the rock pressed close and the air grew thick with silence.

"No one follows," he told Baaz at the entrance. "The community must stand without me. Test if the Light endures beyond one man's shadow."

Baaz nodded, grief etching his face deeper. "And if you do not return?"

Akbar's eyes met his, hollow. "Then the spark was never truly free."

He vanished into the dark, the torch's flicker swallowed by the stone. Above, the mountain stirred uneasily—followers whispering of the Mullah's retreat, wondering if the victories had been illusions, if the Darkness had claimed its prophet at last.

The deepest tunnel was a place even the boldest followers feared to tread—a narrow throat of stone that wound downward until the air grew still and heavy, as if the mountain itself held its breath. Akbar had found the chamber weeks ago during a solitary walk, a small hollow where the rock formed a natural seat, smooth from centuries of dripping water. Here he stayed, the torch planted in a crack, its flame the only movement in the endless dark.He opened the book, but the words blurred. The teachings that had once burned in him like fire now felt cold, distant. He read the lines he knew by heart: the world as a mixture of light and dark, the soul a prisoner in flesh, violence and desire the chains that bound it tighter. He had taught these truths to thousands, used them to forge a people unbreakable in battle. But now, in the silence broken only by the torch's faint hiss, doubt crept in like water through stone.

"My son," he whispered to the empty dark.

"You were the purest spark I knew. Born in this mountain, raised on these words. Yet the fever took you. The chain held you, broke you. Where was the Light then? Did I free you—or did I drag you into a deeper prison?"

He closed the book, pressing it to his chest. Memories flooded: the boy's small hand in his during evening readings, the way he had recited the parables with a child's clear voice. Akbar had built an empire of stone and steel to protect that spark, spilled rivers of blood to defend it. Tribes shattered, enemies buried— all for the promise that knowledge would unchain the soul. But whose soul? The dead followed him in the dark: Rahman choking on his own blood, Malik staring in disbelief as the blade twisted, Torjan falling with his father's name on his lips. Hundreds more—tribesmen, followers, innocents caught in the grind. He had called it necessary, the dark answered with dark so the light might endure.

"Was I the defender," he murmured, voice echoing faintly off the walls, "or the jailer all along? The world is built of mixture—light stolen, scattered, trapped. I fought to gather it, to protect it. But in the fighting, did I feed the very darkness I named enemy? My hands are stained. My victories built on graves. If the soul escapes through knowledge, what knowledge have I gained but the taste of blood?"

The torch sputtered, throwing shadows that danced like accusing spirits. He thought of Fatima above, her grief silent but deep, of Baaz and Yahya holding the community together with questions in their eyes.

They waited for his return, for the voice that had guided them through fire. But here, alone, he saw the chain clearly: his own making, forged link by link in the name of freedom.

"I became the prince of this small realm," he said to the stone. "Ruler of a darkness I called light. The spark in me—has it grown brighter, or has it dimmed under the weight of what I built?"

He set the book aside, no longer needing its words. The questions were his own now, heavier than any text. The tunnel pressed close, the silence absolute. For the first time in years, Akbar felt like a man alone with the truth he had spent a lifetime chasing.

Days blurred into one another in the deep chamber, marked only by the slow consumption of the torch. Baaz came once each dawn, silent as a shadow, leaving a small bowl of bread and water at the tunnel's mouth before retreating. No words passed between them; Akbar had forbidden it. The community above carried on—patrols maintained, teachings read by Yahya's steady voice, Fatima eating and sleeping in silence. They functioned, as Akbar had commanded, proving the Light could burn without his hand on the flame.

Down below, Akbar sat motionless, the book unopened beside him. Hunger came and went; thirst he slaked from the dripping wall. The darkness was absolute when the torch finally died, leaving only the faint memory of light behind his eyelids. He did not relight it. In the perfect black, the questions circled like wolves.

"If the world is mixture," he thought, "and every act feeds one side or the other, then what have I fed? I struck down the tribes to protect the spark, but in striking, I scattered sparks—sons, fathers, boys who might have one day seen the truth. I built this mountain as refuge, yet it is a fortress of stone, another cage. My followers call me guide, but they kneel as men once knelt to khans and kings. Have I freed them, or merely changed the shape of their chains?"

He saw his life unroll in the void: the farmer's son sharpening a sickle under stars, the first poppy field blooming in defiance of hunger, the knife in the night, the fire on the ridge, the peace bought with graves. Victory upon victory, each tasting more of ash.

"And my son," the thought came sharp as a blade. "I taught him the spark endures, yet his small body lies cold in the rock. If knowledge frees the soul, why did mine fail him? Was I so busy fighting the Darkness without that I became it within?"

The silence offered no answer. He sat for what might have been hours or days, breath slow, body still. The questions exhausted themselves, circling tighter until they knotted into one: Who am I, if not the man I believed?

Then, in the absolute dark, something shifted. Not thought, not memory—a stillness deeper than the tunnel itself. Akbar closed his eyes though it made no difference, and waited.It came not as vision or voice, but as presence: a warmth behind his eyes, faint at first, like the memory of sunrise on closed lids. No shape, no color—only light, pure and unborrowed, rising from within the darkness he had carried so long. It did not speak, did not judge. It simply was: the spark, untouched by his wars, his doubts, his bloodied hands.Tears came then, silent in the black. He did not move, did not reach for it. He only sat, breathing with it, feeling the weight of the mountain above and the vastness below, and for the first time in

years, Akbar — knew peace.The torch remained unlit. In the deepest tunnel, one spark burned brighter than any flame.